Tree of Life: Epilogue

Myshu

Copyright Information

This ebook was automatically created by FicLab v1.0.102 on January 4th, 2024, based on content retrieved from www.fanfiction.net/s/2321765/.

The content in this book is copyrighted by Myshu or their authorised agent(s). All rights are reserved unless explicitly stated otherwise. Please do not share or republish this work without the express permission of the copyright holder.

If you are the author or copyright holder, and would like further information about this ebook, please read the author FAQ at www.ficlab.com/author-faq.

This story was first published on March 25th, 2005, and was last updated on March 25th, 2005.

FicLab ID: Lrlw8kcc/lqz3l6rf/50000E5U

Table of Contents

Title Page
Copyright Information
Table of Contents
Summary
1. Tree of Life: Epilogue

Summary

---

title	Tree of Life: Epilogue
author	Myshu
source	https://www.fanfiction.net/s/2321765/
published	March 25th, 2005
updated	March 25th, 2005
words	31,589
chapters	1
status	Complete
rating	Fiction M
tags	Complete, Fanfiction, Final Fantasy IX, Games, Mikoto, Zidane T.

Description:

Sequel to Tree of Life. Symbiosis's aftermath. IncredibleEdibleBlack Mages, naked Genomes, swearing, lichens, frying pans, apple juice.

1. Tree of Life: Epilogue

It takes a village to raise a child.

African proverb

Tree of Life: Epilogue

"Just pull it out."

"Mr. 138…"
"Don't do that! You'll make it worse."
"This damage is extensive."
"It's a miracle he's still alive."

Small voices.

"It's wood, right? We can cut it out."
"What's that green stuff?"

"Um, Mr. 138…"
"Look, you'll cut him to pieces. It's too deeply rooted."
"How on earth did all that get in there to begin with?"
"I can't stand blood… I think I'm gonna be sick…"
"Mr. 138!"
"We could burn it out…"

“Are you crazy?”
“You’d have to be careful.”
“Well we can’t just leave ’im like that!”
“The wounds’ll get infected.”
“They probably already are.”

Who’s there…? I-Iiifffaa…?

“HEY!”
“What?”
“Um, I think he’s coming around.”
“What!”

Who…?

He could see, though his eyelids were numb and sluggish. Everything was thick and heavy. Sounds, images, sensations… as if he were smothered under a woolen blanket. Made of molasses. How can it be made of molasses if it’s already made of wool? He couldn’t think at all. Nothing was straight. Right was down and up was left and pain…

light?

He groggily turned his head (he hoped it was his head that was turning—or that he was at least moving of his own volition—or that his head hadn’t simply fallen off and started rolling on the floor—he probably wouldn’t notice if it had)—and—and—

bygodsthelightburned—there were fuzzy, steeple-crowned spectres, each with a pair of burning embers smoldering in their pitch faces like scarecrows at the barbeque and they loomed over him with those eyes… *eyes*?

"Ack! He's awake!"

"I told you."
"I think he's trying to move!"
"Make him stop!"

Some collective gasps.

"…Not like that, I mean! Anybody know a sleep spell?"

"Stand back." A curious twinkle filled his ears and drowned in his slushy brain.

It was dark and quiet again.

The Black Mage Village met its first bout of pandemonium since Kuja set foot in the ministry of fleeting promises two years before.

Nuef, one of the resident Genomes, had returned from his usual forays on the open road with what

was immediately presumed to be a human corpse. What initiated the chaos was the revelation that this arrival was not merely human; he was a Genome, one of the lost clones, and—more importantly—he was still alive.

Suffice to say, this was big news to a race with such a thoroughly limited population, and everyone became keenly interested in the arrival's survival, even to the point of panic. Perhaps ironic was that any given Black Mage was more wound up over the affair than the entire Genome tribe combined, but this was not surprising when considering the blank-slate mentality of the monkey-tailed race.

The first emergency to be tackled in the calamity was a painstaking operation to divorce man from tree.

It had taken the better of a day and a night to extract the vestiges of Iifa's influence from the stray Genome's prone, open body, and several attending the procedure were sure that some spots were missed, still. Mages and Genomes alike were baffled by the condition. Mr. 138, the impromptu physician, described it as if "he'd been stuck with a tree and it just kept growing anyway until it didn't know its roots from his bones." Knives were handy to carve out the distinction between plant and animal again,

but even a fine blade couldn’t penetrate some of the fleshy crevasses without sacrificing a few vital organs. A couple of clever mages set their sorcery to burning away the elusive plant matter, though despite their strained accuracy every little slip of the flame was cause for wincing and much wringing of hands. Once surgery was exhausted the tender Genome was given a cursory wash (his hair retained an unbecoming verdure despite persistent scrubbing), carefully bandaged, and afforded a bed in the home of the Genome chief, Mikoto.

After that, all there was to do was wait. He would recover or he wouldn’t, and no one dared cast their lot on either.

When in doubt, the Black Mages looked to Vivi for their role model. He was seen as a worldly presence with wisdom that transcended his childish front. Vivi, ever simple and humble, failed to see himself this way, and he usually conferred leadership to either one of the “grown up” mages (age was a matter of perspective in a populace with an average lifespan of a year) or Mikoto, who was indifferent to the burden of responsibility.

Mikoto was upright and cold, with a passive mien that drifted from one moment to the next without

overturning as much or as little as a leaf. Vivi found it more than apt that her name, in Terran, meant “still wind.” Though the back of his mind tried to tie the similarities together, Vivi concluded at length that her spirit had nothing to liken her to her older brothers. They were bold, assertive—pompous, each in their own way. Mikoto and Kuja were both callous, but he in a malicious way rather than her calculating insensitivity. Kuja was vain and poetic; Mikoto was plain and practical. And then Zidane…

Zidane was loose and cool, with a slick voice and eyes that were always inviting a good game or a warm smile. He was a wily breeze that could stir enthusiasm and optimism wherever he went, or turn fiercely against any threat to his friends like an angered gale. He was fun and impetuous… and a leader. Kuja led by fear and power, but Zidane led by charisma. People wanted to follow him. People followed him even if they *didn’t* want to, for many reasons Vivi failed to understand. It was almost supernatural.

If Vivi hadn’t followed him… It was impossible for him to imagine how radically different this alternative was. He would have never found the Black Mage Village, for starters.

Mikoto was a leader out of necessity and seniority. She was the most learned and privileged of the village's Genome tribe, and without their revered creator Garland present there was a power vacuum in the clones' structured existences that only she was qualified to fill. The Genomes and mages came to like her in time, but that was irrelevant to how she gained her authority.

What was important was that she used it, and used it well enough for the others to develop a great deal of respect for her decisions. This was perhaps the only thing that staved off a riot in the face of the extraordinary events of the past weeks.

The stray Genome's arrival sparked a flurry of anxious business and tight gossip. A superstitious lot, the Black Mages didn't dare whisper more than might jinx the whole enterprise, and the Genomes in their old habits were hard-pressed to recall any given name, much less speak precisely about he-that-ought-not-be-spoken-about. As this was, the arrival's name was not uttered aloud once in the village, lest the spell be broken and reality disappoint them with news of his passing.

Mikoto was more diligent with her memories, and Vivi more practical with his grasp of reality and

life. They had well ago confirmed with each other what the others only suspected, and between them they brandished enough tact not to fan any kindling hopes in the village just yet. Their dear friend and brother was, after all, a total wreck, dwelling in a dubious state of survival that Mikoto's pessimism was determined would collapse shortly. Yet all of the Genome chief's grim insights could not endanger the possibility of a miracle, nor could it dampen Vivi's enthusiasm on related regards.

As thrilled and relieved the diminutive mage was to see his old friend returned, his timing left something to be desired. Vivi was already in the throes of his own personal project and could not spare as much time as he wished to tend to his ailing comrade.

Vivi had long before confessed to Mikoto a concern for the future of his fellow mages, whose "stoppings" were happening too quickly and too regularly to sustain the already scarce population. Every villager the little mage had first become acquainted with during his days on the road had already passed on, much to Vivi's dismay and grief. One by one, all his friends were stopping while fewer and fewer newcomers were arriving in the village to replace them. It was not long before the

Genomes (which decidedly weren't burdened with the same problem) ironically outnumbered the people after whom the village took its name. This was all a natural consequence of the stopping of the Mist (and thereby the manufacture of Black Mage soldiers), which Vivi couldn't object to in good conscience, even if it spelled the end of his kind. Although he would never—on his grandfather's grave, he swore—want to bring back the Mist or any of its evils, Vivi was convinced that unless some manner of procreation were introduced his generation would die out without any successors "to carry on their memories," as Vivi put it himself.

Mikoto hesitantly suggested producing more Black Mages in the very same style his own line was manufactured. While this wasn't a practical long-term solution (and, again, Vivi loathed to meddle in Mist, the last of which was fast evaporating anyway), he was willing to experiment. With the Genome chief's knowledge, his magic and some generous donations from mages that did not outlast their basic possessions, Bobby Corwen's old stable had been converted into an incubation house for a very different breed of egg. (The chocobo was a little put out, but industrious mages quickly erected a larger stable to accommodate the grown fowl.)

Weeks of trail and error at last produced three patchwork shells that brooded promisingly. If these three bore well, Vivi speculated, they would experiment without Mist to create three more.

The first batch was indeed successful. The entire village celebrated the birth of three pint-sized Black Mages with a feast that unrivaled any that took place in those woods heretofore. Mr. 256 and 352 had even supplied fireworks, and Mr. 482 served as the village's first fireman. There was boiled owl, pumpkin pie and campfire songs aplenty.

True to his vow, the next week Vivi headstarted the effort to hatch another trio, this time without the infamous key ingredient. The second batch, not to belittle the miracle of the first, was the decisive one; it would set the precedent for future generations of mages and hopefully answer whether or not it was possible to survive without what Kuja had called the "dregs of souls," the Mist.

After months of grueling research and theory, the only matter was what Mikoto and Vivi had chosen to implement in the Mist's place. At first some of the other mages were horrified to discover the two "ransacking and desecrating" the graves of stopped Black Mages, and it took a little more than Mikoto's

logical consolations to smooth the village's feathers and assure everyone that it was for a good cause. Borrowing the essences of mages gone would help bring about new ones… at least, that was the theory.

New mages from old mages from Mist? It was a thin approach to circumventing the Mist. Even if it worked, how many times over could a mage's essence be "recycled"? How could the population ever exceed the number of mages initially produced? Would the new ones last longer than their predecessors?

Everyone had opinions, doubts and questions, some hopeful, some less than supportive. Although support for the project was eventually offered by every villager in one regard or another, Vivi above all others was most religiously dedicated to the endeavor, spending day after day at vigil, study and work, and night after night in a bed of hay alongside his "children." No one contested his paternal claim, and even the three of the first batch affectionately called him "Papa."

And so, for what was approaching two weeks, he was shut into the nursery for all long hours of the day, and sometimes even the short ones. It was in

this time that Nuef and Bobby carried in the great interruption to the community.

The parallel suspense of eggs in waiting coupled with the wounded Genome's pending recovery pitched the village into a nervous mood. Mikoto insisted that all carry on their lives as usual. It was difficult to ignore through the mundane, however, that in one chief's house lay the promise of life, and in the other, impending death.

The most suspenseful part was that it was impossible to tell which was which.

A private reprieve was taken every evening, when both chiefs would emerge from their dwellings and relieve themselves of their charges for a short walk and a picnic in the local cemetery.

It was late spring, the rainy season only dawning, and the hallowed outpost south of the village was more beautiful in bloom than solemn or dreadful, as some graveyards are. They would sit on a hill overlooking the field of mounted hats and eat in silence. Afterward, when both were full yet far from satisfied, they would always talk like so:

“How are your eggs?” She didn’t hesitate to bestow possession: *his* eggs, despite the method of creation in her design, and before her in Kuja’s.

“Fine thank you,” Vivi would vaguely, if politely, answer. And then, in turn, “How is he?”

Mikoto would stare into the blossoms and shake her head. With little elaboration each would return to work, to meet again tomorrow.

Mikoto was a very perceptive girl, though Vivi doubted she knew that one more life balanced on the mortal precipice alongside the Prodigal Genome and incubating shells. That was yet another issue Vivi was determined not to mingle with the already agitated affairs, though it drove every thought and action he had undertaken since the “egg project” began.

‘Not much time left. Have to hurry.’

Vivi wearily nodded at Mogryo, the moogle perched on the naked pickets fencing the nursery, who bobbed his pom-pom at him in response. He stopped to gaze at the yellow-feathered blades of the hut’s windmill (an amusing yet silly installation for

what was initially a chocobo stable, especially considering that it was not powered by wind but by the water mill churning busily nearby) before plodding into the candlelit shack. Night was creeping on his heels as Vivi turned and closed the heavy wooden door of the hut against it.

He shuffled over the crushed straw carpet, pausing again at the cozy pile in the room's center. Three patchwork canvas bubbles, stitched together so crudely if carefully, so imperfect if promising, waited in a boxy nest for their time—his crude, imperfect, precious little eggs. They weren't much more for size than chocobo eggs, but just right all the same. Maybe soon, maybe later, maybe never, they'd hatch.

Vivi wrapped up his hope and carried it over to a small, coarse wooden desk laden with months of ideas, rubbish and research. He lit the hanging lamp with a flick of his finger, crawled into a well-worn chair, wiggled in the wicker seat until he was comfortable, and lifted a chocobo quill pen over a sheet of thin parchment.

So little time… some work left, still. Months of vigilant and exhaustive study and craft in things only Creators should meddle in were finally coming

to fruition. It had been a very long-winded, stressful process, and he was very, very tired. With any luck, all his work and worry would be worth it.

After coming all this way, though, he wasn't sure how to tackle this final task in front of him. It was an awesome feat to condense his entire story—the meaning of his life—onto a sheet of paper. He wasn't sure where to start, what to say… and to whom he was writing. He couldn't help but dwell on the past, and there was a lot on the subject to think about—far too much for the human language to express.

'I'm so tired…'

He had not even scribbled an opening thought when a bundle of rags in the nearest haystack stretched and yawned in a gentle, long squeak.

"Oh," Vivi started, surprised at the intruder, and then relieved that it was only Ti, one of his own. Ti was a marvel to the brotherhood of Black Mages; she was a little girl—a very little girl, actually, making the smallest Black Mage even the short-statured Vivi had ever seen. Her name was abbreviated from "tiny," not to demonstrate the height of creativity on her papa's part. Garbed in typical Black Mage fare, she couldn't be called on

her gender by first glance, so as a gift one of the Genomes donated a pink scarf that she kept wound around the stalk of her hat.

Every conversation with his children didn't fail to amaze Vivi. They were maturing very quickly (perhaps too quickly, he worried), but at any rate much faster than human children. Within a week of hatching the three could chatter like birds, and now after less than a year they were greatly resembling their parent in size and bearing. Their play indicated that they were promising magicians as well (a troublesome fire in No. 352's onion patch was attributed to their names), but that was no surprise. Magic was, after all, the Black Mage trademark.

(*"You know, you got some major power for such a little guy."*)
Vivi set down his pen and turned to greet her. "Hello. What're you doing here? Where are your brothers?"

"They're outside playing," Ti briskly replied. She then whined through an invisible frown, "I miss you, Papa. You never play with us anymore."

Vivi turned a guilty glance to the floor. "I'm sorry. I've been busy." He brightened with a

suggestion. “You still have Bi and Zi to play with, though.”

It was Ti’s turn to look at the ground. “Bi and Zi pick on me,” she muttered, “They call me too little.”

(*“What’s wrong…? Are you peeved at me because I called you little?”*)
Making a note to reprimand those two later, Vivi shook his head reassuringly. “You shouldn’t worry about that.”
(*“To hell with looks. It’s what’s inside that counts.”*)
“It’s what’s inside that counts. I’m little too, remember?”

The point lost, Ti slapped the floor in front of her emphatically. “Yeah but I’m even littler than you and Bi and Zi and, and everybody! Am I ever gonna get bigger?”

Vivi tipped his chin and looked out beneath the brim of his hat at a lost spot on the wall, one decorated with crude drawings, yellow feathers and a framed portrait of a chocobo. “I used to ask my grandpa that,” he said distantly.

“What did he say?” Ti asked, ever hopeful.

“‘Someday’.”

Ti tilted her head skeptically. “You don’t seem very grown-up to me. Not like Mr. 256 or any of the others.”

“No…” Vivi agreed, as if noticing such for the first time. “I guess ‘someday’ never came.”

Ti flopped onto her back, sprawling over a cushion of hay with an exasperated whine. “Aww! It’s hopeless, then.”

“Hehe.” Vivi smiled. She was too cute. “I think you’re perfect just the way you are.”

“You’re just saying that because you love me,” Ti remarked cynically.

“Well, it’s true,” Vivi returned.

“That you love me or that I’m perfect?” she tested him.

“You decide.”

“Papa!” She pouted. “I’m serious.”

“I told you not to worry about it. Size isn’t everything, you know.”

“I know…” the tiny one grumbled half-heartedly and rolled upright. “But it’s nice.”

She wanted to grow up right away. In some precocious ways like that she was a lot like Eiko. Vivi wondered what Eiko was up to these days, off in Lindblum with her adoptive parents. Did she think of him sometimes? Did she miss their adventures together as much as he did?

This returned his musings to the pen in his hand. After brainstorming over it a great deal his daughter piped back up.

“What’re you writing?”

Vivi blinked, something that resembled a shutter flipping over a lit projector. “Oh, um… just a letter.”

“To who?” naturally followed.

Whom should he thank?

Really, he shouldn’t neglect due credit, for everyone helped. All the villagers had been very generous towards his strange, feverish behavior, in all their understanding, donated materials and general support. No. 336 and No. 482 had constructed the eggs themselves, once given the proper supplies. And then Mikoto… she was the most helpful of all. She was always ready with advice and knowledge, should Vivi only ask. He was glad to have her around. Everyone really looked up

to her, and she wasn't even as old as Dagger! She seemed to carry a lot of responsibility… Vivi wondered if it was that same way for Mikoto in Bran Bal. Probably not. Life in the Black Mage Village was a radical change for the Genomes, after all, so life before must've been different.

So different.…

How they came to their village… how *he* came to the village… he could never forget. He didn't want his friends and fellows and children to ever forget, either—how it all began.

That was why, when he sat down to write out his purpose, though he was really writing to everyone, he knew just whom to address it to.

I always talked about you.…

Everything after that came too naturally. As he wrote, Vivi slipped into a zone where only his own thoughts were heard and time itself seemed to wait for him to finish. It was like a trance, and not until he emerged from it was Ti's alarm loud and clear.

"Papa! Papa!"

Vivi jumped, the pen flipping out of his clumsy fingers. "Oh! Um, what?"

The little mage was bouncing excitedly around the nest. “Papa, papa, papa! I think they’re hatching!”

“What!” Vivi might have convinced onlookers that he knew a float spell, the way he flew out of his chair towards the rattling bunch of eggs. One of them was rocking on its own, tiny scurrying noises issuing from within. As it rolled and knocked on the other two, they began to rustle and move as well. Vivi was transfixed by their quirky little motions. Ti was ecstatic, running laps around the nest and cheering, “Yay yay yay yay they’re hatching!”

“Ti!” Vivi almost gagged on her name for lack of clearing his dry throat. “G-go get the others! Hurry!”

“Yep yep Papa getting everyone!” she bubbled on her way out the door, leaving Papa momentarily alone with the restless brood. The nest sat on a stand that was barely within the short mage’s reach. Vivi stood on the balls of his feet, his head just clearing the top that way, and leaned on the edge of the hay-filled box, his chin buried in the backs of his hands and his bright unblinking eyes glued to the eggs. “… pleeeease hatch…” he mumbled in prayer.

A few eternities passed. The instigating egg shuddered and split along its broadly stitched seams,

releasing a fine draft of ether magic. Little black toes poked out of the rift in the shell, then a blindly groping hand. With a squeaky heave the entire patchwork collapsed, falling apart around a dazed, wildly blinking—very alive—newborn Black Mage. All this, just in time for an eager swarm of mages to flood the room, and several curious if less enthusiastic Genomes poking their heads through the crowd to get a look for themselves.

Like a pebble breaking a tense pool, ripples of awed quiet spread from the mages first on the scene and quickly enveloped the entire stable. It was like a party stuck out in the snow and huddling around their last match with closed breaths, lest one false puff snuff it out. Silence waited on the newborn to make the first move.

He shuffled in his bed of hay, swept a broad, appraising look around the room and its inhabitants, and finally rested his gaze on the nearest pair of eyes staring back. In a fit of curiosity the child sat upright, leaned forward and tapped the brim of Vivi’s hat. A muffled chorus of sighs and “Aww!” s resounded off the walls. Vivi, paralyzed by this culmination of events, looked on almost helplessly as the eggs behind the first born splintered and

cracked open in unison, revealing two more breathing, blinking, confused little mages.

With their hatching, the spell broke and chaos ensued. Everyone was chattering at once, inundating the cramped stable with cries of relief and joy. No. 336 squirmed his way to the nest and took one of the hatchlings into his arms, and No. 482 and No. 138 quickly scooped up the two others. The villagers passed the squirming bundles around, cuddling and cooing and quarreling over what to name them. Bi, Zi and Ti were hastily introduced to their new siblings during the frenzy, and together they immediately attempted to teach them how to play, something to the adoring amusement of the others.

Vivi was in a daze. Before the whirl of events had passed he was somehow pushed to the back of the crowd and then finally edged outside by inquisitive Genomes bargaining for a glimpse of the excitement. He wasn't hurt by being so bluntly shoved aside, however. As it was he was so filled with joy he could hardly catch his breath, and the crisp twilight air of the stable's front garden was suddenly refreshing to bask in.

Inside, the merriment was far from dying down. Laughter and joyous squeals shook the falling night

as the community marveled at every nuance the newborns had to offer.

“So cute!”
“They’re so little!”
“Look, that one’s a little bigger…”
“I want to call this one No. 77!”
“No you can’t!”
“Why not! It’s a lucky number!”
“So the other two are unlucky?”
“Give Nuef a turn. He wants to hold one.”
“N-no I don’t! Why don’t you hold one first, Une?”
“No way! You first!”
“Please. Who’s the child here?”
“They won’t bite, you know.”
“Is one of them a girl? Huh? I want a sister!”
“Do they talk? Can they walk yet?”
“I wanna hold ’im!”
“Look!” No. 352 exclaimed, almost proudly, as he held up one of the hungry infants, “He’s trying to eat my hand!” This outburst was rewarded with another round of chuckles.
“You said they don’t bite!”
“Maybe somebody should feed them first.”

Vivi was utterly happy, much more than for all his childish glees combined. There was a future for his children now that no one—not Terra, or Iifa or

even death could take away. Memories lived forever. Memories would carry on, *so long as there was life and death.*

Vivi sighed as a great burden evaporated from his shoulders. He could rest now, his great contribution finally complete. However, there was a shadow nagging his heart, and until he stepped away from the exuberant crowd and glanced upon the meanwhile abandoned huts and cabins he could not find the source.

Through the dawning shadows he found Mikoto, standing beneath a rope-strung tiki lamp and watching the party from the covered walk bridging the village creek. The pumpkin-carved lantern spilled a warm orange glow over her fair features and into the sifting water below.

Vivi waddled up to her side and proffered a friendly greeting. “Hi.”

Even in the dim ambiance she looked notably pale and tired, though on her typically empty expression she wore something Vivi was not accustomed to seeing: a smile. “I’m very happy for you,” she next-to-whispered, her gaze not drifting from the celebrations.

“Thank you,” Vivi replied and took a long turn looking over the bridge’s rail at the bustling stable across the village. He could already see the first star waking over the treetops.

“…I’ve never been this happy. They’re going to live.”

Mikoto, for once not raising her usual score of doubts and uncertainties, simply nodded.

Turning from the joyous occasion, Vivi asked for the last time, “How is he?”

It was her custom to shake her head and walk away, but that night she was slow to respond. After an aching silence she took Vivi’s hand, almost startling him with the break in routine. “I think you should see him,” was all Mikoto said as she led Vivi out of town, through the woods and into her hut.

Vivi would admit to feeling guilty as he paid his friend a long-overdue visit. Priorities had their way of becoming entangled with greater ones. He tread timidly across the wooden planks of the Genome chief’s floor as Mikoto guided him to a lonely bedside. When the Black Mage glimpsed its occupant he was reminded of the other, deeply

embedded reason for not conjuring the will to visit: his sick friend was a painful sight to behold.

His skin was chalky white—not white like the soft porcelain that fleshed Kuja—rather like dust caked onto a blackboard—like the naked fish after its scales are stripped away—like a corpse. He looked like a mummy already, the stained bandages ready to stick to his bones should only that thin layer of skin hurry up and rot away. His hair was streaked with green and red and pulled away from his face by a bloody cotton wrap. He was a lump on the sheets, not stirring the slightest inch, a very faint wheezing the only sign of breathing.

“I couldn’t stop the infection,” Mikoto began to explain in her favorite flat tone, that familiar, consistent voice Vivi’s only comfort for the moment. ‘I tried everything but… it just got worse.’ She swallowed. “It won’t be long, now. If you want to say anything to him… He can’t hear you, but…”

Vivi didn’t remember if Mikoto finished her sentence. The next he realized, actually, she had left the room, leaving behind only her words to ring against his empty thoughts. *“It won’t be long, now.”* They carried a different meaning now that she had said them, as opposed to the nagging mantra Vivi

had used to spur himself to work on his project. With the eggs hatched and well and his project thus fulfilled, it seemed now that Vivi had exchanged one pressing concern for another.

This time, unfortunately, there was nothing Vivi could do to help.

His feet felt like lead as he inched over to the edge of the bed and gave his weight to it, holding onto the springy mattress as if it were the last lifeboat in the sea. He rested his cheek on the sheets —they were very cool and soft—and numbly reached for the invalid's hand—it was very clammy and cold to the touch, even before Vivi had tugged the thick glove off his own black velveteen, inkblot hand.

Say something… say something…? Suddenly apart from the fluid eloquence he wielded with a pen, Vivi couldn't say anything for a desperately long while. He stared longingly at the Genome on the bed, the mirth of just moments ago flushed out of his heart and replaced with icy, hopeless despondence.

He began to think. About many things. About the past. About the present. His thoughts beat him ragged. Zidane used to tell him not to think too

much. Zidane used to say a lot of things. He wasn't saying a thing, now. Vivi wished he would.

He began to prattle off his wishes like a spoiled child.

"D-Don't stop, Zidane. I want you to see my kids. There's six of them now. Bi likes apples. Zi's afraid of the dark. Ti's a girl! We've never had a girl Black Mage before. She's so little, but I'm sure she'll grow bigger. I don't know about the other three yet; they were just born, after all. I don't know if they'll know magic like Bi, Zi and Ti or anything but they're alive and they're all… amazing…"

Before he could help himself, he was crying. He couldn't make his mouth say everything at once, so his meaning was compressed into choked syllables.

"…and…"

'And it wouldn't have been possible without you.'

"…I…"

'I would have never found this place if you hadn't taken me here.'

"…we…"

We all were fighting together, trying to find our way… find a home… find ourselves.

Remember that promise you made in Garland's castle?

(*"Don't leave us again, okay?"*)
(*"Never…"*)
Remember…

"…please…"

'Don't leave us.'

I think I finally understand what it means to be alive.

"I'm… so tired…"

So tired, so weak, so much pain…

No time left.

Exhaustion finally claimed him. It had been stalking him from the beginning. Vivi couldn't hold his eyes open a moment longer. He remembered, remembered… last wishing for the chance to make a difference, in this one little thing, for this one, waning life.

And if it meant his own in return… it would be worth it.

…you were a very special person to us,
because you taught us all how precious life is.

It was like being born… not that he remembered what being born felt like. His mind was in a dim rut that couldn't dredge up such simple parameters as his whereabouts, how he got there and what he was doing. Even his identity, something more precious than he had the capacity to imagine, was shrouded somewhere in his twilight consciousness.

His first action was decidedly inaction. He tried to move, but it was immediately apparent that none of his muscles were willing to respond. The more firmly he embraced awareness the more vivid his sensations became, and with that his second observation dawned on him:

Every. Thing. Hurt. From the top of his head to the tip of his tail, he couldn't think of a single part of his body that wasn't either in stiff, aching pain or numb beyond relief. Crippled by confusion and atrophy, he was once again stuck.…Again? Why did this situation reek of familiar?

What *was* his situation?

He fully awoke to a new world, one of light, color and open spaces. It was a difficult adjustment at first, and not just for his eyes, which batted at the deluge of blinding daylight until the shape of a room washed out of the tears.

It was a quaint cabin, the walls constructed of upright wooden planks. A grandfather clock stood by the door, which wasn't more than a curtain of glass and ivory beads parting this room from that beyond. These he observed from the vantage of a plain, quad-posted bed. While its blanket was cool and comfortable, the thin, crumpled sheets and pillow only vaguely buffered the wire springs that pinched his waking nerves. Incapable of rolling over and out of the mattress's maw, he was left to stare straight ahead, up into a ceiling of thatched straw, reeds and brambles held aloft by spired hardwood beams. Dangling on nails from these supports were stringed ornaments and oddities such as owls' feet, griffin claws, kupo nuts, wax candlesticks, translucent river stones (possibly quartz), spider nets woven from yarn and a… frying pan. They clanged and jingled in the slight draft like a child's mobile trying to be a chandelier trying to be a wind chime.

‘Where is this? How did I get here…?’

His nostrils tingled with the fragrance of spring flowers infiltrating the cabin from the open window on his far left. He sneezed—DAMN it hurt his poor ribs.

A yelping gasp responded. He jerked a glance window-ward (which helped him discover the biting crick in his neck, yet another ailment to plague him) and noticed a girl there, starting from what must’ve been a very light sleep. She fought with her hammock for a minute before the curses abated and she steadied herself long enough to shoot him a wide-eyed look of surprise.

Apart from looking rather feral at the moment, she was pretty, he noted. She had a lean figure garbed in close-fitting white muslin and a pink poncho draped over her shoulders and slender arms. Plain red ornaments clipped her short blonde hair away from crystal blue eyes. The partially drawn shade let golden sunlight pour onto her back and highlight her young face. She bore a fine, intelligent countenance that reminded him of… of…

’…Dagger.’

He remembered, and his musings piled into a crash. He felt himself deflate under the burden of recall, and he couldn't sort all the memories at once. A sequence of people and events began to pull itself out of the wreckage, each one quickly stamped with a name and passed over for the next.
Garnet. Vivi. Steiner. Freya. Quina. Cleyra. Lindblum. Brahne. Kuja. Iifa. Eiko. Amarant. Cid. Hilda. Terra. Garland. Genomes. Memoria. Crystal. Kuja. Iifa.

Iifa. Iifa…

Symbiosis.

'Dagger…'

"Dear God," the girl on the hammock spoke. The impression by that interjection alone was of a richly flat, incredulous, cynical voice—

Mikoto.

"You're awake." As if it were a crime. Or a freak accident. Or a freak crime. Or he was just a freak.

He blinked at her. There wasn't much else he could do. His throat was scathingly dry. She must've noticed his pathetic attempt at talking. Mikoto swung out of her hammock and left the room, to

return moments later with a glass of water. Somehow on route she transformed from the shocked creature he roused from the hammock to the stiff, composed Mikoto he'd known before. She seated herself beside his pillow and held the glass up to his lips. "Drink this," was all she said for it. Her voice carried such a dead ring that it was difficult to discern any motive, or even indifference. He didn't question her or the precious water, however. The cool liquid was sweeter than ambrosia to the parched Genome, who drank ravenously. Once finished, he took a spell to catch his breath—he was ridiculously easy to tire, apparently. Mikoto set the glass aside and waited patiently through it before asking, "How do you feel?"

A fairly standard question. He struggled for a place to begin. After dwelling on the question a while, he licked his chapped lips and tested a word. It cracked like a frog's. "Fine."

Mikoto huffed at his defiance of the obvious.

His turn to ask questions. "Mikoto?"

She perked one eyebrow and echoed the hail. "Zidane."

His own name hit him hard enough to stunt his impending enquiry. It was almost a foreign word. He smiled weakly; it was the most refreshing thing he'd heard since he woke up—hell, longer than that.

At length, his point returned to him. "Uh… how did I get here? Is this the Black Mage Village?"

She sighed, a presage to a long, difficult answer, but then merely nodded, opting out of his first question.

Her hesitation muddled him. "How did I get here?" he pressed. Mikoto stood up and began to pace about the room. She stopped at the window, looking out into the afternoon as if a passing cloud would drop an answer outside her doorstep. When it didn't, she gathered a full breath and began to speak.

She explained his arrival in the village and the days that followed. They talked. He pursued answers zealously, like a child. Some things he asked just to hear a human voice respond, a real, human voice. Some of the girl's habits in conversation were gratingly reminiscent of Iifa's—he learned quickly that Mikoto's favorite answer was silence, but Zidane was too well-versed in *that* game to be cornered by it. If he prodded enough, she'd tell him things.

“Is this your house?”
“Yes.”

“What’s all that crap on the ceiling?”
“They’re gifts from the other villagers.”

“…Oh. Gifts for you?”
“Yes.”

“What for?”
“I’m still not sure, myself.”

“How long have I been here?”
“Two weeks by now.”

“Was I asleep the whole time?”
“You were unconscious, yes.”

“That’s it? I slept? Nothin’ else happened?”
“Sometimes you talked in your sleep.”

“About what?”
“Not much of it made sense. Mostly feverish rambling. You were delirious for days.”

“Did I mention anyone’s name? You know, like in the stories.”
“What stories?”

“You know, those tragic tales about star-crossed lovers and brave warriors and knights where the

guy’s on his deathbed and just before he kicks it he whispers the name of his one true love… stuff like that.”
“You’re silly.”

“Well, did I?”
“I still say you’re silly.…And yes, you did.”

“Hehe, really?”
“Yes.”

“Whose name?”
“Several, actually. I didn’t keep track.”

“Com’on, you must remember some. Indulge me.”
“Hmm… Iifa.”

“…”
“What’s wrong?”

“…Nothing. Any others?”
“Hmm. Some of your friends. Some ‘boss.’ Kuja, once. Frequently you called for ‘Dagger.’…What’re you smiling about?”

“Nothing. Just happy.”

“You’re silly.”

“I know.”

“…Zidane?”

“Yeah?”

“What’s ‘symbiosis’?”

“…”

“…”

“…I’m feelin’ kinda tired, now. It hurts to talk too much.”

“I see. Get some more sleep, then. I’ll be right here.”

“Mikoto?”

“Yes?”

“…thanks.”

When he woke up again it was raining. He didn’t know why offhand, but the pattering drum of water made him cringe. He swallowed the memories squirming to the surface like worms from mud and sought out his roommate.

Contrary to her promise, she wasn’t right there, though the flavor of something meaty tinged the air.

It accompanied the sound of clattering pots and bowls from the enigmatic void outside his quarters.

"…Mikoto?" he stressed his voice to throw it into the beyond.

"What?" flew back, somewhere from the vicinity of the noise.

"Where are you? Is something cooking?"

"Boiled owl stew. It's a delicacy here," she briskly supplied. Then, as if to retrace the conversation to cordial roots, she stuck her head through the door and began anew.

"Hello again. Sleep well?"

"I guess. How long was I out?"

"It's been a day."

Zidane grimaced. "Really? Sorry…"

"Don't apologize." She vanished behind a flourish of beads before he could rebound and better articulate his guilt. He instead held his piece and stewed in the bed, waiting for her return and trying his options at movement. Flexing his hands and turning his head wasn't without strain, but doable, although he had to concentrate pathetically hard to

stir a twitch from his tail, the fact of which troubled him deeply. He added a question over it to the queue and moved on to examine other things, mostly himself.

‘I sure have a lot of bandages,’ was the most obvious point. *‘Bloody ones. Yuck. Was I really hurt this bad?…Seems I’ve lost a lot of weight, too. I’m all bones.’*

Mikoto’s voice rang back to him, “It’s good timing that you’re up now. I was about to wake you anyway for supper.”

He found it funny that he hadn’t even thought about food since he woke up, and even then it didn’t seem appetizing. Whether he asked for stew or not, in a brief while Mikoto carried in two bowls, presumably one for each. As she helped him sit up against some spare pillows he unloaded his stock of questions.

“Mikoto?”

“Hmm?” She folded a small towel over his lap and planted one of the wooden bowls in his hands.

“I can barely move…”

“I know.”

“Am I gonna be like this forever?”

Perhaps. Time will tell. She opened her mouth to answer, but after a glimpse of his face her skepticism was checked by the concern that tinted his features. She ducked her gaze away from his and shook her head in an attempt to seem reassuring. “No, I’m sure not. It’s probably a combination of things: infection, muscular atrophy, trauma, malnutrition… nothing you can’t recover from. You shouldn’t be surprised. This’s what happens when you’re stuck in a bed without moving for weeks.”

‘Or a tree,’ he silently appended. He shuddered on the thought. *Speaking of stuck in bed*, “Mikoto, this is your bed, isn’t it?” Assuming the affirmative, Zidane sank into a remorseful shrug. “I’m putting you out…”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she curtly dismissed his conscience. “Eat your stew.”

She dragged over a chair from the wall side, took up her own bowl and sat down to eat beside him. Zidane meanwhile stared into the wispy steam rolling off the surface of his murky supper. He never had to eat with Iifa. He actually couldn’t remember how long ago his last meal was.

“Mikoto?” He glanced over at the girl, intending to solve that very mystery. ‘How long have I been gone?’ Realizing too late that the question was a little too ambiguous, he stammered over a clarification. “I mean, how long ago was, um… When was the last time…? Kuja…? I—”

She waved a hand to cut him short, like a magician reading his mind. “—It’s been two years.”

A potent, awe-filled silence.

“…Damn.”

Though there should have been much more to say to having two whole years cut out of one’s life, Mikoto couldn’t have expressed the sentiment better, herself. She minded her own supper and gave Zidane a minute to recover.

Once he did, “So, I guess a lot’s happened.”

She frowned and rebuked his crestfallen demeanor. “Don’t worry about it and eat your stew already. You need nourishment.”

Finally heeding her, he tried to lift the hot broth to his lips, but met with shaky success. Before the bowl tipped over Mikoto’s free hand was braced

around Zidane's, and she was compelled to abandon her own boiled owl to feed the hapless Genome.

"mmm… sorry," he mumbled between sips, ashamed of his frailty.

"It's okay," was all she said about it.

When he couldn't take any more he mustered a faint shove to push the bowl aside. He was hardly hungry to start with. Mikoto pulled away and sat back down in her chair, resuming her now cold meal. "You didn't eat much," she passively remarked.

Zidane couldn't catch the breath to respond right away. Why the hell was everything so exhausting? It was fast becoming frustrating. "…I'm not hungry, really."

"You'd think you would be. You haven't had a bite since you got here, at the very least."

His cheek twitched in a shrug. "I dunno." Changing subjects, he sought to find out just how much two years could leave him in the dark.

"What's happened since I left? How's everyone doing?"

“I don’t know for sure. I could only tell you about this village. I’ve been living here since we last met.”

“Well, what’s been going on here, then? Are you getting along with the other villagers?”

Mikoto accurately judged that as a poke at her antisocial tendencies. “Just fine,” she answered poutingly.

Zidane grinned to hear it, lending her a look of… pride? She blushed to think her big brother might be proud of her developing “people skills.”

Then, “How’s Vivi?”

That rush of color instantly drained from her face. Mikoto bit her lip and put down her stew. Zidane’s expression dropped accordingly. “Huh? What is it?”

The girl’s features tensed, holding back something dreadfully fierce. She let out a stiff breath. “Vivi, he…”

She was interrupted by a tumultuous snarl that was watered-down but nevertheless disturbingly loud. In that very moment Zidane clamped his arms around his gut and turned a shade of green that was new in Mikoto’s books. “Oh God.” With another

disquieting growl he was bent over the bedside. “Oh… *God.*”

Not needing another hint to know what was coming next, Mikoto sprinted from her chair, fetched the nearest empty pot and skidded back to Zidane’s side. She ditched the pot on the floor and jumped back, watching from a safe distance as the sick Genome retched and heaved for the next two minutes until every last morsel that might’ve been an owl in a past life was in that pot and out of his stomach. When he was finally done the exertion left him slumped over the edge of the bed, panting like a spent dog at the racetrack.

“Oh… God,” he wheezed, as if a Creator were bound to intervene, much less care. “That was terrible.”

Mikoto sighed, edged the pot out of the way with her foot and sat down on the bed with him. He cast a dispirited glance between her and the vestiges of owl in the unlucky pot. “…sorry ’bout your stew.”

She reached over and patted his back consolingly. “It’s okay,” was all she said for it. Zidane whimpered to the floor sulkily.

“I’m a broken little vessel.”

He looked up at the delicate hand playing through his hair, his eyes wandering up Mikoto's arm to meet her soft, resolved countenance.

"You'll mend."

You taught me that life doesn't last forever.
That's why we have to help each other and live life to the fullest.

He was a wretched thing for days into weeks. Scar-striped like a tiger, lean like a weed and lame like a rag doll, his body was a confused mess that never knew when to hunger, tire or hurt, much less how or why. Perhaps more painful than all his burning wounds and the gnawing revolution in his gut were the things that haunted him in his dreams, where his only companions were the oppressive darkness and a cold, stiff, robotic voice—and he'd wake tearing and screaming until Mikoto's arms were around him and her gentle talk dulcified his wild fit. She'd ask if he wanted to talk about it, he would decline, and she simply held him until the sobbing abated and the fur on his tail smoothed down. She cooed like to a broken bird that everything would be all right—and right there, the

worst of all was quivering and sniffling like a child under her pity—and right there he hated himself for all the trouble he was worth to her and all the things he wasn't worth anymore.

Mikoto was never far away. Her voice was cool and quiet, yet patient and strong, not unlike *hers*… He missed Dagger sorely. He was closer to her now than he had been for all his slumber in the navel of the earth, yet lest he rise and go to meet her they'd still be worlds apart. If he could find the strength to walk again he would; through this singular desire the will to live persisted.

Will was about all he had left, anyway. He felt like an infant. He couldn't do anything for himself besides lie in bed and grumble impotently. Mikoto did everything for him; she proved to be quite the vigilant caregiver. He felt guilty for burdening her and ashamed of his helplessness, and not even the reason that it was all beyond his control could assuage his conscience. At the height of embarrassment, she even bathed him—his *little sister* had to give him baths.

The majority of his recuperation was spent either in idle chatting with Mikoto or sleeping. He knew he wasn't awake very often to receive any, but he still

wondered why he never had any visitors. Mikoto relayed something to the effect that her house was “off-limits” to the rest of the village, and Zidane scolded her for being so unwelcoming as to keep them both lonely and bored. In light of his reprimands she still didn’t reconsider the policy, throwing out fluff excuses such as not being lonely or bored at all and not wanting to recklessly excite her sick big brother in his condition. Zidane didn’t buy a word of it and kept after the good fight.

On another front, eating was his greatest headache, and in short time he came to absolutely despise the effort. Sometimes he’d wonder what Quina would think if she… he… *it* knew he’d renounced food. The mental picture of the result made him laugh. Mikoto pestered him with supper once a day despite his protests and the ever-powerful argument that nothing he swallowed was inclined to stay down.

Thinking on it, the predicament made sense: Just like the rest of his body fell out of the habit of moving about, his stomach lost the idea of processing food during his long stay without. It was stupid as far Zidane saw things, but it made sense. Mikoto insisted that practice would eventually have

him functioning normally again, but it was that very practice he dreaded so much.

Persistence indeed prevailed as the next few days weathered increasingly better for Mikoto's hard-cooked meals. Though she'd call any food that stayed where it was intended a success, the resulting discomfort would have Zidane argue for a mixed victory.

He approached the bottom of a bowl of rice, dumped his spoon inside with the leftovers and held the whole mess at arm's length as if it were toxic waste. "Can I stop now? Please?"

Mikoto sighed reprovingly and took the unfinished bowl from him. "What am I doing to do with you? You're never going to get your strength back if you don't eat well."

"I am getting stronger," he heartily objected. "Really. A few days ago I couldn't even sit up on my own."

"You still can't even finish a small bowl of rice!" Mikoto countered.

Zidane crossed his arms and pouted. "There were too many of them. They outnumbered me. And intimidated me with their… whiteness."

She smirked at his sorry sense of humor and put the bowl away. Once she was out of sight Zidane dropped his defiantly playful facade and the real battle with the rice began. He flopped back onto the bed and groaned miserably, holding his sore belly. Somewhere away, he heard the racket of dishes being washed. He couldn't wait for Mikoto to finish and come back to tell him everything would be all right. Reflecting on such a wish made him wonder if he was becoming too dependent on her mothering.

A rare apparition, a visitor, barged into the hut, bounding over the threshold in a rush and erupting through the curtain of beads into the bedroom. Speeding and disoriented, the figure Zidane immediately pegged as a Black Mage twirled on his oafish feet and crashed to a halt, the seat of his pants cushioning the graceless fall. He sat in the middle of the floor for a few seconds, swaying dizzily. "Oh… ow."

He was a little kid buried inside a mound of colorful clothes. A large, supple mage's hat balanced upon a small, shady head whose large round eyes burned like candles' tongues. His bulky blue jacket fell crumpled around a large belt and striped green-on-white trousers. The blob of starched flax and soft leather reached up to adjust his hat before turning

his bright eyes on the surprised person in the bed. “Ah… ah?”

Zidane flinchingly sat up on one elbow and stifled a startled cough. He stared in wonder at the petite mage, swallowed a wistful lump in his throat and called to him.

“…Vivi?”

The mage answered with a voice that was definitely not. “Huh? No…” He cocked his head to one side and frowned, appearing hurt and confused —though no more than Zidane. He blinked at the doppelganger. “What?” *‘Not Vivi?’*

In a fit of timing, Mikoto appeared. She took one look at the mage on the floor, inflated like a flustered hen and assumed some disposition between peeved and horrified. “Bi! You’re not allowed in here,” she snapped.

The not-Vivi sprang to attention. “Sorry Miss Mikoto! I-I just wanted to tell you that, um, some man is here. He came to see you.”

“What?” the Genome chief spat as she stiffly recoiled from this announcement. A second later some distant correlation arrived at her, and she

tempered. “Oh. I see. Bring him this way. I’ll meet him outside.”

“Yes m’am!” Bi bolted away.

“Mikoto?” Zidane tried to reel her back as Mikoto turned after the mage. He was grasping for something—an explanation, an excuse—anything to vindicate what he just saw. She paused at the door, sighed at his begging expression and somberly shook her head before leaving him alone with his bemused complaints.

Zidane wished he could get up and pursue her, but his gut growled an order to lie back down, so he was compelled to oblige. The infirm Genome squirmed over the sheets for an aching while, his concern momentarily staved from the matter of a minute ago.

The whiff of voices called him back. They sounded to be right outside the window, though the shade was drawn and the scope of the conversation was confined to soft, low notes; it was probably between Mikoto and that visitor. Zidane wondered who the man was. He wondered what they were talking about. He wondered why Mikoto was so bent on sheltering him, and from what.

It didn’t make sense. He didn’t understand. She was hiding something, that was certain. *’That Black Mage looked just like Vivi. But it wasn’t him. But I coulda sworn… I’ve never seen another Black Mage that looked quite like Vivi, but that one could’ve been his twin. Vivi, he’s a prototype, isn’t he? I remember someone mentioning that. How many prototypes are out there? What did Mikoto call the one I just saw? Bi?*

‘Where is Vivi, anyway? I haven’t seen him at all. Well, unless just now counts, but it doesn’t. If he was here in the village he’d come visit me, wouldn’t he? I thought we were friends…’ His imagination entertained some unfriendly doubts. He shut them out. *’No… something’s not right.’*

He could’ve guessed it before he overheard it, but he didn’t want to. He squinted at the shade, the late sunlight printing upon it two blurry silhouettes framed in gold. Perhaps thinking his ears were with the rest of his body and too tired to function, much less strain, they conversed under the delusion of privacy. Zidane didn’t need to overhear them to figure they were talking about him, at any rate.

“…thought… wouldn’t make it.” Mikoto’s voice. “…recovered quickly… still… ery weak.”

The other voice was not native to the village, to no surprise. It was young, masculine, roughly businesslike (in more that “get to the damn point” way than a sales pitch), and *damned* if Zidane didn’t recognize it from somewhere…

However, unlike the clear, light notes of Mikoto’s speech, the other offered nothing intelligible to eavesdrop upon. After some prolonged, muffled talk, he heard Mikoto whisper through grave reverence something so startling that it was echoed in an outburst just enough for him to catch.

“Wha’ddya mean, Vivi stopped?”

Everything stopped.

His heart felt like a brick. His throat craved some soft potion. His tongue was far too numb to care.

And, for a very fleeting moment, he wanted to stop too.

He was dumb with shock, and only the remnants of that fated discourse filtered into his skull. “…the night before he woke up… would have told… didn’t want to upset him in his condition.”

Oh, *bullshit*.

If it’s about Vivi he wanted to know, to hell with sparing his feelings, and to the next hell with his health. He was outraged and heartbroken beyond the ability to notice his surroundings. There was only a tired, bleak cloud that he could lie and brood in. Sometime, somewhere through this bleary reality Mikoto reappeared, her visitor in tow. It was Blank. Zidane didn’t even pay him a glance—he’d deal with that later. He focused on the girl, now the target of his grief and anger, and stuck her in her tracks before she could even utter a word.

“Vivi stopped.” He almost impressed himself with the way he said it in such plain, grim deadpan, given that he was ready to break down and cry right there.

Mikoto was taken aback, anything that might’ve been on the tip of her tongue instantly dropped. She stammered over her lost speech for a moment, tossed a grasping look to the figure in the doorway as if he could return her voice, or better, rewind time, and then righted herself with a weighty, resigned sigh. She nodded the affirmative.

It wasn’t enough for her to admit it. Zidane wanted to know why. Why did he stop? Why Vivi? Why the secret?

He was beginning to lose his cool grip. His fists were shaking. His eyes were starting to sting. “Why… didn’t you tell me?” He had already heard the excuse she gave Blank; he just wanted to hear the one she’d prepared for him, if any.

He didn’t give her much of a chance. “Zidane, I…”
“—Don’t you think I’d want to know something like that!” he cried with as much force as he could muster. The result was something pathetically desperate and hoarse. If he could’ve, he’d storm out of the room, not-so-much to emphasize his point as to get the hell away from Mikoto and impostors and stupid lies and death and then, and then… who knows? As it was, he resorted to the less dramatic, tucked into a pocket between his blanket and a pillow and refused to budge.

He didn’t speak, eat or even show his face all the next day, which was fairly impressive considering the only place he had to hide was under the covers. He didn’t respond promisingly to any of Mikoto’s consolations, and she was fast becoming exasperated with the situation. On the following day she was

determined to drive him out of mourning if it killed her.

She squared off with the unflinching mound of linen atop the bed.

“Zidane, get out of there and eat your supper.”

No response.

Mikoto crossed her arms, prepared for battle.

“Zidane, I mean it. Quit wallowing and join the living world again. Don’t make me beat you out.”

Nothing yet.

In tune with her threat, she swatted a pillow over the lump in the bed, which connected with a heavy, padded thud. A delayed “ow” issued from the blanket, but naught else.

His recalcitrance incurred something few mortals would witness since: Mikoto’s wrath. “Zidane! Damn you, why are you so stubborn? You need to quit being a baby!” The pillow came down again and again.

“goaway,” was how he repaid her kindness. Mikoto at length spared the pillow, shuddered with some repressed outburst and stomped away.

“And he wonders why I didn’t want to tell him!” she lamented to her living room.

“Leave him alone,” the lounging redhead on her sofa advised. He was whittling a split reed between his teeth, one foot propped on a scarecrow-esque mockery of a stuffed cat, something a former Black Mage considered art. Mikoto had plenty of other labels for it, but once the craftsmage passed away it found a place in her home despite her criticism.

Blank couldn’t help but catch a sense of estrangement about Mikoto’s home, as if she were only camping beside the Black Mage’s village, not residing in it. Its very locale suggested that much, nestled within a copse at the end of a narrow, leaf-strewn corridor through the piney woods that shrouded the settlement so well. It took five minutes to walk from Mikoto’s hut to the nearest mage-built structure.

She kept everything she needed to survive in a storeshed around the side of the house, and occasionally made trips into the heart of the village to procure more foodstuffs—from where, exactly, and what she exchanged for them Blank hadn’t figured out. He did know that the mages and Genomes of the village had a meeting square, a

bustling, familiar gathering place in which campfires and meals were shared every evening. He knew that Mikoto never attended these meetings. She had a portly wood-burning stove that not only transformed a corner of her dwelling into her own private, if quaint kitchen but effectively eliminated the need to participate in the commune.
From all outward angles she appeared to revel in being isolated.

Whatever her fascination with being alone, it bored Blank to pieces. He had to get out and go to town for suppers. As puny and unexciting the village square was compared to even the loneliest pubs of Treno, it offered at least some semblance of social life.

Mikoto deflated, plodded towards a cushioned chair, fell limp into it and rubbed her eyes wearily. “He refuses to eat. I can’t make him, but… he has to eat something. He can’t afford not to. I’m worried.”

Blank shrugged. “Don’t worry. He’ll come around. He gets like this when he’s upset. He’ll shut everybody else out, try to handle it on his own. He used to run away from home, not come back for days. It’s just his way of coping.”

Mikoto was far from put at ease by this assessment. She leaned forward and confronted Blank with a heartfelt entreaty. “You won’t talk to him?”

Blank harrumphed and turned one cheek away. “Yeah, right. He’s never listened to me before. What makes you think he’s gonna start now?”

He expected some kind of rebuttal, concession, or something, but Mikoto didn’t offer any. When he looked back, she was still drilling him with those fretful, pleading blue eyes…

Blank sighed. “Fine.”

Mikoto stepped out to get something, hell if Blank remembered what it was—something about lye. The only instruction left to him was to coax Zidane out of hiding any way he knew how.

The redhead, alone with the task charged to him, slipped through the beaded curtain and entered the bedroom with a clunky satchel hefted over his shoulder. He sat down on the edge of the bed, dropped the bag at his feet and looked down on the

introverted patient for an empty while before hitting on a plan to rouse him from his fortress of solitude.

His crafty fingers combed through the corners of the blanket until they snagged their fuzzy, wiry target. Blank gave the tail a good, solid tug, something past experience guaranteed would annoy Zidane out of the most tenaciously-held hiding spots. Blank realized that the case was serious when this did not occur and he instead received a throaty, resentful growl.

Blank let go and surrendered his mitts to the air. He scratched his head, fishing through the slick tufts of red hair for another idea. At length he sighed, a man of action reduced to using words.

“Com’on kid, cheer up. This ain’t like you.”

The bedlump didn’t stir. Blank pulled out his next card.

“Mikoto’s worried about you, you know. The more she worries the more she rides my ass about it. The more she rides my ass the more I kick yours so get up before you get a thrashin’.”

“lea’me alone,” a tiny reply seeped through the comforter.

Well, at least they were on speaking terms now.

Next Blank took the logical tack, and then bolstered it with a girl. “Damn, kid, it’s not the end of the world. What’re you gonna do, lie there and rot? You’ll never see that Dagger chick again if you go that way.”

This at last yielded ostensible results. A flaxen cap poked out of the cotton bog and looked warily about the room. Flouting sensitivity, Blank smirked at the comedy of it all. “What’re you, a fucking turtle?”

Hurt, the turtle relapsed into hiding. Blank grumbled sourly at his big mouth, his gaze falling to his feet.

…And to the bag nestled there, which contained his last resort. His eyebrows arched beneath his thick-strapped headband, and he voted to dig in and pull out a couple of bottles. “Look, I brought’cha a present. If you come out I’ll let you have some.”

Without waiting for his mulish companion to take the bait, Blank unceremoniously flipped the cork off one of the bottles and threw back a sample. His cheek twitched after mulling over its flavor. “Not bad. After-taste like piss,” was the verdict.

The downy cocoon rustled and shifted as Zidane wiggled out of it to investigate the offer. He spied the second bottle and reached for it.

“So, *the thing* lives,” Blank drolly teased as he handed over the drink. Zidane ignored him and turned the glass flask over in his hands, searching for a label or any identifying mark. Finding none, he consulted the source.

“Where’d you get these?”

“Stopped by some retarded village built over a canyon. Can you believe how weird some people are?” He gave a condescending snort and took another swig. “One of the resident weirdos sold ’em to me.”

“Conde Petie,” Zidane duly informed him. He sat upright, shrugging out of the bedclothes and tasting a fresh draft of air. He was going to try to pop open his bottle for himself when he caught Blank passing an appraising look over him.

“What?” he snapped, perhaps too defensively.

Blank was giving him a look fit for a green sky or a square egg. “You look like a damn mummy.”

Zidane couldn’t believe where this was coming from. He stared straight into Blank’s quilted visage and turned the sardonic remark back on him. “Speak for yourself, patches.”

Blank conceded defeat, “Ouch,” and threw back another gulp of tonic.

The two sat in silence for a deep while, each staring through their drinks and wondering if the meaning of life could be found at the bottom of a bottle. They mutely consented to put the thought to test. Zidane grimaced at the lingering sour flavor, and his stomach burned and growled resentfully. After telling it to shut up, “You’re right about the aftertaste,” he noted.

“Told’ja.” Blank cleared his throat and struck for the root of the matter. “Hey, I know how much that Vivi kid meant to you…”

Zidane’s glare could’ve frozen the liquor in Blank’s hand. The redhead promptly revised his approach.

“Okay, so I *don’t* know how much he meant to you, but you really shouldn’t take it out on Mikoto. She’s just doin’ what she think’s best for you.”

The Genome shed the icy mask and looked guiltily into a corner. His tail thumping against a bedpost was the only stirring for the next minute. He then sighed. “…I know. I was just—I mean I… I don’t know. I guess I should apologize.”

Blank didn’t reinforce the notion, not wanting to press it further. He didn’t speak again until interrogated.

“…What’re you doing here?”

When the occasion was right Blank’s answers could be extremely spartan and to-the-point, one step away from the abbreviated mayhem of pilot jargon. Context in these cases carried his conversations further than words. “She…” He vaguely jerked a thumb over his shoulder at a Mikoto that wasn’t there. “…sent a letter. Boss just about had a fit. Sent me right away to see if it was true.” He turned a sincere look to the Genome. “Everyone thought you were dead, man.”

“Heh.” Zidane reached up to brush a blonde tuft out of his eyes. “…So did I,” he smiled behind his hand. He dwelled on that thought for a moment before coming to another question. ‘Um… does everyone still think that? That I’m dead, I mean.’ An

acute look of concern crossed him, and he leaned forward to ask gingerly, “Does Dagger think that?”

Blank stared out the window, sipping from his bottle between answers. “Garnet? Yeah, Probably. Unless Mikoto wrote to someone else. She told me she didn’t. Boss probably don’t want to spread rumors, so I’m sure he shut the other guys up ’til I get back with the word.”

Zidane crossed his arms and dug into that news. “Huh.” A curious tail twitched. “I wonder why she even wrote to you guys to start with.”

The Tantalus-sent cracked a grin. “Said you were calling for the boss in your sleep. Among other people. But mostly Boss.”

That bandage-patched tail ballooned into a broomstick as its owner cringed alarmedly and turned a shade of pink to match Mikoto’s wardrobe. Blank had to throw down another draft of tonic to quench the urge to laugh.

“Oh,” Zidane squeaked, and then cleared his throat. “*That’s* embarrassing.”

“I’ll say.”

They drank and talked, bouncing across all the relevant topics.

“How long are you staying?”

“Until you’re well enough to come back with me.”

“Really? You’re going to be here a while, then.”

“That’s fine.”

“So… speaking of Boss, how is everyone? How’re the guys? What’s been going on since I left? What about my friends? Freya, Amarant, Quina, Eiko? Is Lindblum rebuilt yet? Or Burmecia? Or Alexandria? Mikoto doesn’t tell me anything. How’s Dagger? She’s queen now—er, still, isn’t she? How’s she getting along?”

“Hold your chocobos, kid. Geez…” Blank passed a hand through his hair, plowing up answers from the top of his head. “Garnet was pretty broken up about leavin’ you behind. Well, I mean, nobody was happy ’bout it. You shoulda seen Boss. I ain’t never seen him cuss and swear like that, and you know how Boss gets. He used some words I didn’t even think went together—shit, some I think he made up. If you put a drinking game to every oath outta Boss’s mouth you’d be on your ass faster than you

could quote ’em back. He said you were the damnedest fool to ever walk the earth. Then he sneezed hard enough to blow out a light bulb.”

“Sounds like Boss.” Zidane suddenly appeared pensive. “So, do you think I was a fool?”

Blank shrugged as if it weren’t a question for him. “I don’t know… Why’d you do it?”

“I had to,” he spoke with quiet resolve, his voice heavy with all the repercussions of a far-away decision.

“Oh yeah?” Blank challenged the righteous determination that landed the monkey in a sickbed, disfigured and malnourished. “And from where you’re sittin’ now, was it worth it?”

Instead of answering, Zidane took another swig —a little too deeply, but it finished the bottle. He coughed and spit, his gullet tripping over the strong drink.

“Pussy,” Blank harrumphed.

Zidane’s riposte was strangled in what couldn’t decide if it was a cough or a hiccup. “hii—shuttup.” He settled for both and clumsily collapsed onto his pillow.

“Don’t tell me you’ve had enough already.”

“Um…”

“Damn, kid, can’t even hold your liquor anymore.”

“I said shuddup, alright? This’s really… ahm… strong.” Another hiccup. “I musta… er, ah… lost my tolerance for the stuff.”

‘Thanks a lot, Iifa. I’m a lightweight again. Any other way you’ve screwed me that I don’t know about yet?’

She couldn’t hear him to answer, of course, but with the fuzzy lull of tonic in his head he didn’t care. “Excuses, excuses,” Blank dismissed his.

Some while later Mikoto returned. She stuck her head in the door, checking for herself whether Blank had met with success. “So you’ve come out of hiding, I see,” she observed to the bedridden Genome, hiding her pleasant surprise.

“Ohyessum,” the bed hermit slurred.

She frowned and approached the bedside. “Are you all right? You look sick again.”

Zidane reacted in a dizzy knee-jerk, trying to sit up and feign sobriety. “Oh, no! I’m—” He hiccupped and tumbled over the edge of the bed, falling on his face, his tail sticking comically in the air. Blank began to laugh boorishly. Mikoto scooped her stammering patient off the floor and set him upright in bed.
“Er, I mean, um… I’m just a little ine—(hic) ine—(hic) intoxi—(hic)…I’m drunk.”

“Pussy,” Blank discreetly coughed, feeling the need to drive the point again.

Mikoto did not take well to this update. She gaped at the inebriated Genome, unable to articulate either outrage or scorn. She settled for confused. “Why are you drunk?”

“Because I’m an alcoholic…?” Zidane hazarded a guess, sounding as uncertain as anyone.

“How did you even…?” For a second Mikoto looked ready to strangle him. Deciding against it, she eyed the suspicious dark bottles and then turned on Blank, initiating a one-sided shouting match. “Why did you give him alcohol?”

The redhead shrugged defensively. “Hey, you wanted me to talk to him, right? I just needed

somethin’ to break the ice, y’know.”

“Oh what nonsense. There were plenty of other ways to go about it. He’s lucky enough to stomach water and you give him *beer*?”

“I think it’s whiskey, actually—”

Mikoto threw her arms up, exasperated. “I don’t care! You should know better. I can’t believe how irresponsible you are, and I just met you!”

“I like to make accurate first impressions.”

Zidane found this remark impossibly funny, and he began to cackle like a hyena. Mikoto tamed him with a smart smack to the back of the head. “I’m glad you find this so amusing, since it’s time for your bath.”

Instantly sobered, Zidane’s eyes widened in horror. “Nooooo,” he weakly protested. “I’m sorry already. I won’t never ever drink again, just anything but that.”

“Stop complaining. I would’ve dragged you out before if you weren’t so busy smothering yourself under the pillows. Now that you’re finished moping you need a bath and a fresh change of bandages. Blank, since you’re here, you can help.”

“Whaaaat,” the redhead whined flatly. “I ain’t got nothin’ to do with this. I finished givin’ the kid baths when he was nine.”

Zidane began to chuckle in reminiscence, but this was stifled under Mikoto’s glowering. “That’s too bad, because 482 usually helps me and he’s not in the village today. You happen to be right here, not busy at all.”

“Yeah, but, I don’t—this’s weird, and… aw, man,” Blank’s argument petered out. He put down his bottle and sighed, defeated yet again. “Fine. Let’s get this over with. What do you want me to do?”

“Nuthin’,” Zidane hiccupped. “He ain’t doin’ nothin’ ‘cause I ain’t takin’ no bath. Naw-uh. Hell no. Not like last time.”

Unbeknownst to Blank, the unversed third party, Zidane had good cause to dread the affair, based on past experience. “It won’t hurt as much this time,” Mikoto tried to sweeten the deal.

“I don’t want it to hurt at all!”

“You can’t always get what you want. I’m not even arguing this with you anymore. I’m going to fetch the water for that bath right now and when I

get back you're going to take it whether you like it or not." She faced Blank again. "Make sure he doesn't try anything silly while I'm getting it ready."

Mikoto marched out in a huff, turning her back to Zidane's pathetic objections. Blank waited until she was out of range before muttering, "Cold, cold bitch."

Damned to a watery fate, Zidane buried his face in a pillow and moaned. Left behind to console this, Blank swiped a fidgeting hand under his nose and addressed his crestfallen friend.

"So… she give you baths before?"

"…yes."

"You can't bathe yourself?"

Zidane tossed him a painfully obvious look. "No. I can't even walk."

"Oh. Right. Sucks. Mikoto she, uh, don't mind, uh…" He gave up on the naked question and moved to the next. "They hurt? The baths, I mean."

"She scrubs hard. Enough to make me bleed, sometimes. Stings like hell."

“Ouch. Well, I guess I see her point. Gotta stay clean if you want to heal up fast. Or something.”

Zidane mumbled something into his pillow that roughly translated to, “whatever.”

Blank was thankful he didn’t have to do much, though he was compelled to watch as he stood by close enough to *feel* Zidane’s embarrassment. He carried his invalid comrade out the back door and into a grassy lot only spacious enough to host a clothesline, ligneous weeds looking forward to being trees and a large wooden washtub. It was fenced in by the blinding wall of conifers and brambles that consumed everything beyond the village limits. The ground was muddy and ridden with pine needles and crab grass.

Mikoto took over from there. She went about it very orderly, like a maid. Blank was at first thrown by her shameless, methodical manner… but then again Mikoto was nothing if not blunt and methodical. She carefully undressed her unwilling patient and unfurled a grotesque length of sticky white cotton, much of it stained with puss and blood. Tossing that aside, she had Blank help her hoist the

hapless Genome into the tub of cold water, and against Zidane's monosyllabic complaints she set a woolly, soapy sponge to her shivering charge, ranting as she scrubbed.

"Whiskey, honestly. I don't understand why you Gaians would want to imbibe anything so awful. What good does it for you? Dulls your senses?"

"It dulls the pain," Zidane softly confessed.

"Are all Gaians pained by the blue light, then?"

Blank, missing the reference, openly grimaced with confusion. Zidane smirked stupidly and tried to assemble her meaning. It staggered back to him eventually. "What? Oh! No, no, it's not… like that. It's just… sometimes, Mikoto, you don't want to *feel everything*."

Blank nodded sagely.

"Well, in that case you especially won't mind if I scrub hard."

Zidane whimpered. He was selectively ignored. "This planet is a giant, filthy dust ball," Mikoto's diatribe moved on to her favorite target: Gaia itself. "It's horrible."

“You get used to it,” her patient murmured helplessly. “Ow, ow! My arm!…Ah! That’s private property!”

“Oh hush.”

Zidane didn’t have the strength or stamina to fight it all off, so he blushingly submitted to her treatment like a lump of livid clay. As a witness, Blank began to get a full idea of his friend’s condition, and especially his disabilities. The kid was bleach pale save the scars and sores that leafed like hemlock along his spine and across his abdomen, legs and tail, far enough to rot away half the fur. Around his neck was an ugly ring of tabby-red-and-brown, blistery scars, as if during his brush with Death the Reaper had made a special effort to strangle him with his bony, wraithlike hands, and the mark of his caustic digits stuck.

Blank had to give it to Zidane that whatever he was lacking in stamina as of late he made up for in endurance. He watched Zidane wince and strain to hold himself up as Mikoto plucked at his tender wounds. A few times he seemed to nod off then snap awake with a quiet yelp, battling at once the painful scrubbing, the cold water, his own failing energy and the dwarves’ draught.

When all was said, clean and dry, Mikoto waved Blank over to point and remark on how and where her patient was making progress. Zidane had to remark on the way they were making a spectacle out of him.

“I feel like a freak on display.”

“I said hush now.” Then, to Blank, ‘Look.’ She indicated with an index finger the pulpy railroad climbing up from the base of his tail. “These wounds are healing well. Pretty soon we can take the stitches here out.”

The redhead had avoided staring for the sake of the kid’s threadbare dignity, but now that he was prompted to he couldn’t tear his eyes away. It was difficult to believe he was looking at the same person he just shared a drink with less than an hour ago.

Trying to pick out recognizable features reminded Blank of an episode on the Blue Narciss, the ship he had piloted at Cid and Baku’s behest to the Outer Continent during the hunt for Kuja (Zidane sure knew how to pick friends. Blank couldn’t claim to have traveled with a more colorful lot.)
It had taken almost a week to traverse the sea between the Mist Continent and their destination.

On one of the warmer, sunnier afternoons the party elected to have a “laundry day.” While the boys were all loitering on deck, waiting for their clothes to dry, that burly, hulking outlaw from Treno (wasn’t he called “The Flaming Amarant”?) looked Zidane over and gave a frank snub on his child-like muscle definition.

(*“You look like you’re going through puberty half-assed.”*)

Blank supposed he remembered it because it was true enough to be funny. The kid’s approaching twenty now and not yet showing a sign of losing that impish physique—Blank could still make it out beneath the seared skin and black scabs.

“Ow, ow! Don’t poke there.” Zidane recoiled from her touch.

“Don’t be a baby,” she put down his whinging and handed him a towel.

“You’re so mean to me,” he pouted and took the towel she offered to cover himself.

Mikoto took up the used, discarded bandages, dropped them into a wash bucket and pulled out the lye she’d acquired from the shop. “Looks like it might rain again,” she said offhandedly as she began to wash the collection of rags.

Blank turned half a glance to the slate cloud cover. “It’s been doing that a lot lately.”

Zidane thought of the monsoon. Then he lost his thought. He was forgetting a lot of things exclusive to his tenure under Iifa. Mostly numbers and things. He couldn’t enumerate pi anymore, though he didn’t consider it such a hard loss. All the knowledge of the world wasn’t worth his freedom, after all.

“Blank, take Zidane back inside. These bandages won’t be clean and dry for a while.”

If this was freedom.

The redhead scratched his brow and nodded. “Yes m’am.”

Zidane clung feebly to his towel and Blank’s mu-skin vest as he was toted back indoors, dropped on that same old, musty bed and thoughtfully covered with a blanket before he shivered the rest of his fur off. Blank then took his chosen chair and procured a reed of mistgrass from his pocket, which he began to chew into gum.

Far away, feral thunderheads growled and spit at the sky.

“So, Zidane…”

“Yeah?”

“I was, eh, wondering if you’re ready to talk about what happened. At the Iifa Tree, I mean.”

The raw Genome wiggled between his blanket and the towel to get comfortable, though that soon proved impossible with all the uncovered sores. “… No.”

Blank looked out the window at a flicker of distant lightning. “Fair ’nuff.”

“…Blank?”

“Yeah?”

The belated thunder shook the eclectic ceiling chimes. “Can I have another drink?”

He only had to finish Blank’s half-emptied bottle to drink himself to a stupor and pass out. Really, he was so tired and sore at that point that any little thing was ready to knock him over and out, but the dwarves knew how to brew something like a kick to the head, which was exactly what Zidane wanted.

He didn’t wake up the rest of the day. His soup got cold. Mikoto might’ve been more than a little pissed. Zidane retired to dreams and let Blank handle it.

Next Zidane knew, it was dark and all but quiet. Flat-footed rainfall dribbled off the thatched roof and either hammered puddles on the porch or merged into rivulets that seeped into the churning stream bisecting the village. The shower's static was interrupted occasionally by the disgruntled murmurs of thunder gods throwing fiery kites into the windless sky.

An especially poignant flash of lightning captured the bedroom in perfect, still monochrome for an instant, and then blotted it all black again. Zidane took a while to collect his bearings, looking up into the shadows of precariously strung kitchen implements and animal parts.

He didn't know how long he was thinking about the nothing he was staring at before he noticed movement nearby, and then the distinct impression of someone else sitting on the bed. As his eyes began to adjust to the dark surroundings he discovered the else's silhouette leaning on an arm that reached over him.

"Mikoto?" His voice was inert and detached, as if he couldn't wake up his tongue, though that observation never reached as far as to bother him.

She giggled and brushed some hair from her eyes. Wait, *giggle*? It might as well have been a foreign language, coming from Mikoto.

“Did I ever tell you? About my purpose?” she began.

Strange way to initiate conversation. “Purpose?”

“You know…” She hummed suggestively. “The reason I was created. The reason Garland built me.”

Instinct had long ago clocked out, else it would’ve told Zidane to change the subject as fast as possible. He didn’t need a sixth sense to realize that something was wrong about this situation, though he was somehow powerless to thwart the topic. “You told me Garland made you to replace me, since I left…” he began to ramble off, not sure where even his own thoughts were leading him. His memories were the only guide, and they weren’t treading pleasant ground.

“Right, that is what I told you, isn’t it? But that’s not the *real* reason.”

“Wha’do you mean, ‘real reason’? What are you talking about?”

He could feel her slight weight pinning him down as she shifted and settled on his hips… *‘Whoa, waitasecond,’* the back of his consciousness railed while the rest of his senses were locked in cataplectic lethargy.
She stretched over his length and hovered there, her nose barely brushing his, her easy, rich breath like silk sliding off her balmy lips. Her eyes—those eyes!—were deep gems casting their spell, calling forth a beast; he thought he could see Leviathan uncoiling in their depths.

“Well,” she laughed in one rolling, heady note, then pressed her cheek to his and whispered huskily in his ear, like a hungry panther, “*The truth is I was to bear your successor, not be one*.”

‘What does that mean…?’ he sluggishly thought to ask, though “What?” was all his numb lips could procure—all, that is, before she kissed him.

Thunder crashed.

In due course he woke up, sultry and bewildered. It was still dark as pitch and the rain buzzed outside the window like the crowd at an airship dock, perpetually, obliviously busy going someplace else.

He bolted upright in bed squinted until he recognized Mikoto's restful shape in her hammock on the other side of the room. She didn't budge or notice him at all, something to his relief. Zidane fell over into his cupped hands with a harried sigh and rubbed his brow until he thought he'd banished the images just played out on the backs of his eyelids.

'A dream? A dream. Dear gods, only a dream.'

That morning he vowed never to drink again.

Mikoto had enough sense to string up the laundry indoors before her work was rained out. Later that day, once the bandages were suitably fresh and dry, the mummification began.

She perched on Zidane's bedside, ordered him to lay out on his belly, and then began spreading gelled arnica over his backside's long-winding, jagged sores, taking tender care this round not to aggravate cuts she'd already rubbed the wrong way bathing. Perhaps she was being too smooth about it, and it startled her at first to catch him purring. It was a throaty, rusty sound, just what she would expect from an old tom many times the usual size. Though she was dimly aware of the ability, she'd never

heard a Genome actually use it before. Who in Bran Bal was ever blissful or content enough to purr?

When she brought to his attention that he was humming like a kitten, his very words bungled an attempt to deny it and came out in an ineffectual drumroll. He buried his reddening face in his arms as Mikoto began to laugh.

“Just like a cat! I’ll call you Pussy from now on,” she teased.

“Please don’t.” He recoiled from the less-than-catlike implications and bitterly muttered, “Like you don’t purr either…”

His comportment all day had been sheepish and subdued. He was particularly prone to blushing, fidgeting and directing guilty glances fastidiously away from her. He hadn’t been meeting her eyes at all, and she was finally beginning to notice. She wondered if he was suffering remorse for his indulgence the day before, though Blank was the one to take the brunt of her heat for that. The Tantalus-sent finally found his footing in Mikoto’s good graces again by convincing her of alcohol’s “medicinal properties.”

“Sit up.”
Zidane complied and she began to wrap him up. After a brief while he started to squirm, as if he wanted to get away.

Mikoto smirked. “Stop wiggling. You’re acting strange. What’s the matter with you? You’re being awfully shy with me today.”

“You’re being awfully gentle,” he deflected.

“I thought I’d make up for yesterday.”

The window was open to a fresh breeze. Outside one could hear the gurgling stream and the occasional explosion of leaves and dewdrops as birds and squirrels played in short, wet fits through the treetops.

Mikoto tied a knot in her handiwork and patted his shoulder to announce that she was finished. She stood up and tossed him a shirt from the laundry basket she’d carried in.
“I’m glad you’re feeling better. I hated to see you so melancholy before.”

Zidane mumbled to his fingers as he buttoned up his shirt. “I’m sorry I’m so much trouble.”

Mikoto shook her head as she began to sort through the rest of the washed clothes. While her hands were busy her mind caught a distracted bug. Before either knew it she was stringing a new line of talk.

“Just when I thought you and your friends had achieved the impossible, you go and best yourselves.”

“Huh?”

His short, perplexed return made her sound silly to herself. “Nothing. It’s just… It’s a miracle you’re alive, you know.” She paused and cast a distant, thoughtful look out the window. “But then, miracles have been in full supply lately.”

Zidane couldn’t puzzle out what was on her mind to save his life. “Wha’ddyou mean?”

She wasn’t sure how to begin, and this was betrayed in a puzzling lull. She tasted a few tentative gulps of air before at last issuing a sentence.

“You know, before Vivi left us, he…” Her gaze hovered around the room, seemingly lost. She finally appeared to arrive at an idea. “Let me show you.” She abandoned the laundry and walked out.

Zidane had no idea what to think or do about her sudden leave, except that it had some vague connection to Vivi. He could only sit on his piqued curiosity until Blank popped in, his visit as random as anything.

“Yo, mummy.”

“Hey, Blank. Where’d Mikoto go?”

Blank wrinkled his nose and shrugged, thrown off his assumption that Zidane would sooner know the girl’s whereabouts than he. “How should I know? I saw her packing a bag earlier, though. Maybe she’s about to take off.”

This bemused the Genome further. “Take off?”

Presently Mikoto returned, a flock of diminutive Black Mages in tow, six in total. They clambered into the small room like driven cattle, restless if agreeable and mooing amongst themselves. Zidane stiffened, startled. It was just like the vision of days before, only… times six.
Blank, equally disarmed, backed up until he fell into Mikoto’s hammock and stared at the bunch until someone told him what to make of it.

Mikoto stepped up to introductions. “Zidane, Blank.” She nodded at them, and then at the little

ones. “I’d like you to meet the children. They’re…” Mikoto hesitatingly held a hand to her chin. The adolescent mages stood by politely while their chief considered their most fitting label. “…they’re Vivi’s.”

The Genome chief could have laughed at their reactions, if her sense of humor was tuned to it. She thought she might have to tape Zidane’s jaw back in place. Blank turned up the rim of his headband with a thumb and gawked at the assembly in a dumbstruck squint.

“Hello!” one of the mages awkwardly squeaked into the stunned silence.

Mikoto swept a bouncing hand over the anxious bunch, introducing each in turn. “You’ve already met Bi. The others are Zi, Ti, Mini, Bitty, and Duck.”

Blank staggered over some expletives before a sense of censorship arrived to curb his speech. “What the—Vivi’s wha—all these mutha—holy shiii—erm… Mist,” he employed a lately dated euphemism.

Zidane shook his head dazedly, emerging from a trance. His first question—out of everything—was,

“Um… ‘Duck’?”

Mikoto’s expression soured. “I’m not sure you want to know.”

Duck quacked like his namesake. The others giggled at the absurd noise, which seemed to break the tense bubble between the “grown-ups” and their visitors. A deluge of childish queries, explanations and observations spilled forth, and it was difficult to follow which mage said which.

“What’s that hanging from the ceiling?”
“It’s a fwying pan, silly.”
“It’s silly, not me! What’s it doing all the way up there?”
“It smells like potatoes and sweaty socks in here.”
“Chief has a neat house.”
Bi spun to face the cornered redhead. “You’re, um, Blank, right? I remember you came to visit Chief.”
Blank cleared his throat. “Uh, yeah. I remember you, now.”
“Quack.”
“Duck’s so silly, Mister Blank! You should see him eat! He’s all like—” Bitty stooped, wobbled and flailed her arms in an impersonation of… well, a duck. The other children roared and applauded her performance just as Duck himself tipped over

headfirst into the laundry basket.
“Ack.” Mikoto plucked him out of the now sullied bin of clothes and set him upright, a static-charged sock hence pasted to his hat.
Ti’s focus quickly landed on Zidane. “Is this the man Nuef found? Why’s he all wrapped up?”
“He looks funny.”

“This is Zidane,” Mikoto supplied, “He’s a good friend of your papa.”

“Really? He knew Papa?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, oh!” Zi interjected, excitedly bouncing on his toes and pointing at the Genome on the bed. ‘Papa told me about you. Remember the stowy, guys? Thu’one about, um, the war and the play and stuff.’
“Oh yeah! This is *that* Zidane?”
“Neat.”
“Can you tell us a story about how you and Papa twaveled the world and fought monsters?”
“Please?”
“Pwease pwease?”

Twelve bright, innocent, golden eyes were at once on him. Zidane, overwhelmed by the attention,

modestly scratched the back of his head. “Eheheheh. You’re all really cute.”

“Zidane can tell you all stories later,” Mikoto primly sliced through the gaiety, “After you give us grown-ups some time alone. Go out and play.”

“Aww…!” the procession bleated as they were ushered out of the hut.

Once they were gone, “Holy shit,” Blank finally completed his thought.

Mikoto stepped back inside, mercifully alone. She frowned at her ravaged, trampled laundry, and then at the nonplussed boys.

“Those—Vivi’s—Vivi’s what? How?” Zidane couldn’t wrap his mind around it. “Mikoto? Explain?”

“I don’t really have time to. You can ask Bi, Zi or Ti about the details. Blank, I hope you can take care of the children and handle everything while I’m away.”

“Whoa, away?” Her brother’s hand sprang out as if to catch her. ‘You’re going? What?’
“Yeah, what’s the deal?” Blank asked.

Mikoto’s stuck-up posture dissolved into an exasperated slouch. “Yes,” she pointedly huffed at Blank. “I mentioned it yesterday. I’m going to meet 482 at Conde Petie, and then we’re going together to Madain Sari. The moogles are going to help us gather wild fruits and medicines. I’m going to learn more about Gaia’s vegetation, and maybe bring back some useful plants. You must not have been listening to me.”

Considering his capacity to hear, Blank stuck his pinky finger in his ear to sweep out some wax. “Probably not,” he grunted. “Did you mention it in-between *bitching and screaming* at me?”

“I did no such—”

“You didn’t tell me you were going away,” Zidane broke into Mikoto’s brewing rebuttal. “How long are you going to be gone?”

She spared Blank. “It’ll be several days. I’m going to take Bobby out shortly. I already have my things packed for the trip. I need to go now if I want to make it out of the woods before dark.”

“Oh.” Effectively divested of argument for or against this trip by her abrupt readiness, Zidane was left with a lame, “Um, goodbye?”

She nodded and bowed slightly. “Take care.” Like a passing draft, she was out the door.

Zidane blinked after her. “Just like that.”

A departing call wafted in through the window, “Blank, put up the laundry!”

The redhead cringed. “Damnit, woman.”

He dropped to his knees and began to scoop up the potpourri of socks and things. Zidane repressed a jeering remark to his back and instead looked outside at the sunlight-dappled dwellings cloistered around the bloated stream like a muddy pumpkin patch.

“I’m a little glad she’s going,” he admitted compunctiously.

“No kidding,” Blank ungraciously grumbled into the laundry basket. “Worse than Boss. Almost worse than Ruby.”

Under the distinct impression that they were on different pages, Zidane elaborated. “…I had a dream last night.”

“That’s fantastic,” Blank said, pejoratively sarcastic. “So did I. What’s your point?”

“It was about Mikoto.…It was one of *those* dreams.”

“Oh yeah?” The implications catching late, Blank dropped his chore and whirled to him. “…Oh! Oh, that’s not right, man. Isn’t she like your sister or something? That’s just wrong.”

He shrugged, ashamed. “I know! But it happened! The dream, I mean. It really creeped me out.”

“That’s just wrong,” Blank repeated, then got back to folding and fussing. “You know what it is? You’ve been hanging out with her too much,” he speculated.

“It’s not like I have a choice. I’m kinda living in her house.”

“I’m just sayin’, that’s probably what it is.” Blank grinned lewdly, snuck a confiding glance over his shoulder and issued the standard question. “So… in the dream… was she hot?”

“Blank!”

Even if you say goodbye,
you'll always be in our hearts.
So, I know we're not alone anymore.

True to her word, Mikoto did not appear again for the better part of a week.

During this time Zidane finally began to venture out of bed and make funny, blundering attempts at walking around. At first it was difficult to convert his bed-legs to land-legs, but with Blank's steady helping hand he managed to work his strength back.

Any peace the Tantalus boys might've found in Mikoto's absence was squashed in the rigors of babysitting. The children were eager and curious towards their new playmates, and together Zidane and Blank devised ways to amuse them without putting forth too much work. Before long Bi, Zi and Ti were schooling their younger siblings in Tetra Master. Zidane thought he was clever about it; Blank very nearly had to intervene before the kids learned a little too much about cards.

They all learned quickly about each other. Bi was the biggest, and the eldest by minutes that he liked to make count in sibling disputes. Zi was a timid, taciturn creature, too much like his papa. Ti was not; she was inclined to boss her smaller brothers and

sisters around with a petulance that reminded the thieves of a certain purple-haired summoner.
Mini, Bitty and Duck were too little and too late to remember anything of their origins, so much of the time they let their superiors answer all the relevant questions. Their personalities were inchoate but gradually dawning. Duck didn't fail to draw attention in the most ridiculous ways, usually by turning up head-first in places he didn't belong. Blank or Zidane would recover him from a tight wash bucket, a rotted-through tree stump or the stovepipe and brush the poor fool clean before releasing him back into the wild and his brothers' cruel and clever traps.

In the evenings before settling down for bed, the kids would pile into Mikoto's room and listen with bated breath while their elders regaled them with tales of kidnapping, thievery, man-hunting, bounty-hunting, alien worlds and magic. Blank kept up his end of the story and checked Zidane's, guarding the fine line between exaggeration and bullshit with childproof invective.

By the third night the long-winded, epic adventure had finally unraveled to its climax and tapered away just short of a "happily ever after." A disappointed pall settled over Vivi's litter.

“And then?”

Zidane started from his reminiscing to catch Mini’s question. “Um, what?”

“And then what happened? What happened after you went back to the Iifa Tree? Did you find Kuja?”

Blank, a lounging, disinterested lump until that point, leaned forward on the edge of his seat like a bear stirring from hibernation. He suddenly appeared keenly interested.

“Yeah, com’on. What happened?” Bi egged on a conclusion.

Blank watched his friend undergo that disquieting transformation that always seemed to take place when prompted by an ill question. Zidane’s quick, clear eyes were clouded of late with some ineffable tragedy that made the once outgoing teenager look somehow… old.

“…No,” he said foggily. “No I didn’t.” Zidane divertingly glanced out the window at the moonlit forest path. “And I think it’s time for bed, ya little squirts.”

But then he’d open his mouth and say something witty or silly and it was all his old self again.

Blank growled, swiped and snarled playfully until the kids were herded out of the room and off to their respective stables. Once he'd learned that the batch were intimidated by him he milked that fact as often he could, though he didn't appreciate being nicknamed "Scary Patches" behind his back. He was a rough-edged, scar-patched creature, that was for certain, but he liked to entertain the delusion that he carried some aesthetic appeal… at least with the ladies, if not with the kids.

He plodded back to the bedroom only to notice that he wasn't successful in flushing out all the rugrats. "Ti, leave your Uncle Zidane alone and git on to bed," Blank chided her.

Ti stubbornly clung to "Uncle Zidane's" tail. "I wanna stay…"

"Let 'er stay," Zidane called a concession. He fluffed an extra pillow and made room for the little girl in bed beside him. Ti merrily accepted the invitation and snuggled into place.

"Tch. Fine." Blank shrugged. "You're too soft to these darn kids. You'll spoil 'em."

In a display of maturity, Zidane stuck out his tongue at Blank. Ti giggled and hugged him.

Why I was born…
How I wanted to live…
Thanks for giving me time to think.

Since Mikoto's stingy visiting policy had slackened, the chief's hut entertained a score of inquisitive villagers. Zidane liked to listen to Mogryo read letters to and from his fellow moogles, especially those that concerned the Mist Continent. He reveled in the "Chronicles of Stiltzkin," as they were beginning to be called. He liked to play short-lived games with Vivi's children, so long as his stamina held out, or sit back and watch the other Genomes chatter in their native Terran, though he hardly caught their meaning, himself too deeply acculturated in Gaian ways and talk. He fancied that if he begged Mikoto later she would give fleeting lessons on his lost language; he had only to remember to ask once she returned.

One morning Blank and Zidane were sitting up in Mikoto's bedroom. The former was idly shuffling a deck of cards, reclining over two chairs nudged close enough together to support his weight plus one lazy foot. The latter lay on his belly across the corner of the bed, too lethargic yet to roll out of the

warm blankets and start the day. The kids were running rampant somewhere; nobody cared.

It was into this scene that two female Genomes, clad only in towels, entered the front hall of the house, looking for all purposes lost. The boys froze like a hushed crowd before the opening of a play. This wasn't something to be seen every day. It was like a comet, or the midnight aurora, or an unburned batch of Cinna's scrambled eggs. The clone girls, clutching their towels modestly around their pale, slender, yet full forms, peered down the hall searchingly, and then into the bedroom, starting a little upon noticing the pairs of eyes gawking at them.

"The hell?" was all Blank could utter.
"Can we… help you?" Zidane was slightly more resourceful.

"Um, we were going to the bath—" one blushingly started. "—but we're out of soap," the other interposed.
"Chief said we could find some here if we ever ran out."

The boys exchanged an indecisive look before Blank, cool as anything, climbed out of his chairs and moved towards the back of the house. He

returned a minute later with a bar of soap. “’ere,” he said as he handed it off to one of the girls.

“Thank you!” they chirped and scurried away, giggling some nonsense on the way out. The boys looked after the retreating girls, watching their spry tails turn up the slit in their towels for a peek at a little extra backside.

Blank whistled. “Damn.” He looked back over his shoulder at Zidane, who was moving suspiciously beneath the covers.

“No wankin’,” Blank said gruffly and directly. Caught red-handed (in a sense), the Genome threw Blank a cross, sulky look, pulled his arms out from under the blankets and harmlessly folded them under his head for a pillow.

Perhaps it seemed noisome and shameless to an outsider, but such incidents as just now were slighting occurrences “back in the day,” when the Tantalus boys were all quartered together in a shady hideout beneath a clock tower. There were only three rooms for eight, and the largest was stocked with bunk beds, some space for cards and horseplay and chests for whatever might be called personal belongings (treasure, carefully parceled out to each member after a good score at the theater or one of

their less-than-legal exploits, was stashed less obviously, and each guarded their lot as ferociously as a fang.) The kitchen wasn't much more than a closet with a stove, a table and a propped hole in the roof to ventilate Cinna's culinary disasters. With everyone carrying on their business in the same clutter, there was no such thing as privacy. Boss and Zidane had the closest things to it—Baku because he was, well, the boss, and accordingly he got the third room to himself. Zidane, being the latest and youngest addition to the crew (his initiation ousted Blank from the 'green' ranks… a story for another day), had his bed stowed up in the attic, which was a cramped pigeon-hole shelved over the main room and accessible only by some strategically-placed ropes. It was ultimately fitting accommodations for a boy who liked to climb and swing from the high ceiling and clock gears "like a monkey," and Zidane cherished his personal space as someplace only Blank had the wherewithal and patience to scale and invade.

At any rate, the curse of the dormitory had all the boys quite familiar and comfortable with each other's habits, even the randiest, and few were as randy as Zidane.

“You never let me have fun anymore,” he grumbled peevishly.

“You’re always horny,” Blank said matter-of-factly, dismissing the pouting.

“So?” Zidane countered as if this point were moot.

“So, have fun on your own time, you bastard.” He grumpily sat back down, took up his cards again and hid a smile. It *was* crass and shameless, but in it he saw something significant of Zidane’s old self, and Blank was sure now that the kid was gonna be all right.

Zidane shrugged mopishly and muttered something barely audible into his elbows that sounded like, “…*couldn’t anyway.*” Blank decided that he didn’t hear it and settled in for a card game. “Play a round?” He waved an ochu card in front of Zidane’s nose.

“Sure.” The Genome yawned, stretched and curled upright like a roused tabby, his back rolling up in a fluid arch. They pulled the bed table between them and leveled a playing field.

“Hey Blank…” This is where—Blank could smell it coming, and his spine cringed with sickly

nostalgia—Zidane brought up another matter of familiarity: the aforementioned “anymore.”

“Remember when we were kids? Well, I was still a kid I guess. And how I’d steal those magazines from Boss’s room so we could look at ’em? And sometimes we—”

“Don’t,” Blank stopped him. “Don’t talk ’bout that. We were young—*younger*, I mean—and stupid. We grew out of it.”

Zidane was stung by the bitterness in his voice. “It never meant anything,” he tried to assuage Blank’s rancour with cool reason. “We were just experime—”

“I said I don’t wanna hear it. We were just stupid, bored kids. It didn’t mean anything because we didn’t know any better. But then we knew better and we quit. Why the hell you bringin’ this up? It’s history.”

“I dunno… sorry,” Zidane relented. “I guess you’re right.” And he mentioned it no more.

‘I don’t know why you talk half the bullshit you do, Zidane.’

Changing the subject yet keeping the topic, “Heh. On days like this I used to head down to Mark Posik’s place. You know that joint on Latté Street?”

‘Here comes some more of it.’ Blank scowled. “That was in the industrial district, wasn’t it? Probably gone now.”

“Yeah, come to think of it. Shame. Good mead, better girls. A few good gil would let me see Susan. She was really sweet. She would listen to all my silly little problems while giving great head.”

“Hrmph. You’re a regular bastard.”

“Phbt, like I never caught you down at Posik’s before either,” Zidane called him on it.

“If you’d been around long enough to catch the sight of me you’d been there too long.” He flipped a pair of cards. “Your move.”

The match played out—it was a tie.

“I wonder what Susan’s up to these days…”

“Haven’t a clue.”

The two played a few more Tetra matches before getting cabin-weary and wandering outside. They camped out the afternoon by a waterhole and fished

until Zidane grew tired of sitting up and Blank tired of not catching anything. He helped walk the lame Genome home along a dusty back road, one arm threaded beneath his shoulders for support.

“Can we stop?” the Genome panted as they crossed a warped wooden bridge. Blank agreed to take a break and they sat down over the edge of the planks, their heels skimming the shimmering surface of the brook.

“It’s really quiet,” Zidane remarked upon the vacancy of the village outskirts.

“Kids probably on the other side of the woods, driving 352 crazy in that onion patch.”

“Why does he grow onions of all things?”

“The hell do I know? Everyone here’s weird.”

“…There aren’t many Black Mages around anymore, are there?”

Blank rolled a glance skyward as he ruminated on it. “Ah, well there’s 138, 352 with the garden, 482, 336 over in the shop, and the kids… Yeah, that’s it.”

Zidane wrinkled his brow. “I thought there was a 256, or something.”

“Stopped last week.”

“…Oh. Mikoto doesn’t tell me these things.”

“She doesn’t like to bother you.”

“I wish she would, sometimes. 256 was a nice guy.”

“Yep.”

“When I was first here… there used to be more. Different ones.”

Blank stared ahead into reality. “Shit happens,” was his final answer.

‘Shit happens. The others musta stopped, too. Poor Vivi had to watch them go.’

“There’s somethin’ heavy on ya,” Blank cut into his sullen musings, “Whatch’ya thinkin’ about?”

Zidane was startled. He felt like his mind had been read already and the question was purely rhetorical. *‘Am I that easy to read? Or does Blank know me too well?’* “How’d you know?”

“You’re an easy read,” Blank somehow confirmed both.

“Oh… Ah, it’s nothin’.” Zidane gave in to the malaise that followed. “…Vivi.”

Blank grunted reverently, enough said. Zidane didn’t feel the same, so he talked on, striving towards closure his words would never find.

“I didn’t think I’d miss him so much. I just… I dunno. I remember the times we were on the road, pitching tent wherever we could. Vivi would have a bad dream in the middle of the night, go find me and crawl in my sleeping bag with me. I’d go to bed by myself and next thing I knew I woke up and he was right there.”

“Heh.” Blank had a whispering flashback about Ti.

“He was such a little guy, quiet like a mouse, wouldn’t hurt a fly… but then he was so powerful… so brave. I didn’t really understand how brave he was until the end. I really didn’t know him…” his voice tapered away, lost.

“He was a good kid,” was Blank’s word on it, and it was enough.

“…Yeah.”

“Did pretty good for himself, too,” Blank continued in a lighter afterthought. “Can you believe all those sprogs a’ his?”

“No,” Zidane answered with a pinch of awe. “I still have no idea how he did it. It’s just amazing. Those kids are amazing.”

“Yep.”

A chorus of hoots resounded from the shadowy thickets beyond a bend in the stream. The owls were getting restless as the sun abandoned their neck of the woods.

“Hey Blank… tell me everything about Garnet. Tell me about the Queen of Alexandria. Tell me how she’s doing. I want to hear whatever you know.”

“You’re really crazy about her, aren’t you?”

Zidane flicked a leaf over the short precipice and watched its fluttering dance to the water. “Whenever I run out of things to think about she keeps coming back to mind. I can’t keep her out of my head. I wonder what kind of life she’s living in that castle. I wonder if Beatrix and Steiner are taking good care of her. I wonder if she still tosses her hair out of her face when she laughs, or sings when she’s lonely. I wonder if she thinks about all the things that

happened after we kidnapped her, or if maybe she… I just wonder if…”

“…If she misses you?”

Zidane bit his lip and looked away.

Blank rolled his shoulders and stretched. “This is just what I hear… I haven’t really been hangin’ around Alexandria much, but I keep in touch with Ruby. You know how Ruby loves gossip. I get an earful just readin’ her letters.”

“How’s her mini-theater, by the way?”

“Doin’ real good, actually. She’s hiring more actors and hands to help with the bar, since so many customers started pourin’ in. It’s becomin’ a real night club. Don’t think that’s what she planned, but she sure as hell ain’t complainin’.”

“Heh, I knew she’d pull it off.”

“Yeah, well… whatever. As long as she don’t make me work for ’er, I’m fine with it.”

“Heheheh.”

“Anyway… She says the queen isn’t up and about much. I guess she’s busy with queen-stuff. Most people don’t see her leave the castle. For the

first couple'a months after she got back nobody saw her at all. They say it's like she was in mourning. After a while she started to lighten up, though. Started makin' trips to Lindblum to talk with Cid, visited Burmecia, diplomatic shit like that. Been doin' good gettin' Alexandria rebuilt, from all I've heard. Place looks like nothin' ever happened nowadays. She's a pretty good queen. Everybody likes 'er."

"That's good… That's real good. I'm glad for her."

"Heh… I ain't even started on the rumors about you."

"Me?" The Genome brightened with anxious surprise. "People talk about me?"

"You shittin'? There's all kinds of tall tales now about the boy who swept Alexandria's princess off her feet and went and killed that evil bastard magician for her. There's so much bullshit about some of it I just break out and laugh whenever I hear it."

"Oh, wow. I guess this makes me famous, huh?"

"Whatever. You're still a bastard, no matter what they say."

“You always make me feel loved, Blank. So, what else do they say about me? Hehe.”

“Eh, well… The whole damn country treats it like a tragic fairy-tale. Thinks it’s a shame you didn’t survive and live happily-ever-after with Garnet or somethin’. It’s kinda…” He hesitated, considered Zidane’s muddled, tense expression, and tactfully refrained from delivering his opinion on public opinion. “Well, you know. All the fairy tales in the world don’t stop some people, though. I’ve heard that, at least in the past few months, rich bachelors and noblemen from Treno and all over have been visiting the castle, trying for Garnet’s hand. And who wouldn’t court a queen if they were rich and had the chance? It’s one helluva position.”

Zidane swallowed. “And what does she do?”

“Won’t give any of ‘em a second look. I heard that if you walk by the castle in the evening, as the sun’s settin’, you can see Garnet out on the balcony, singing. It’s the same slow, sad song every night.”

Blank tried to look his companion in the eye, but Zidane was bent forward, letting his thick golden locks veil his face.

“It’s pretty obvious to everyone she misses you, you know.”

The kid’s tail ticked. He wrung his hands and watched his dispatched leaf drift away. Blank, not daring another word or consolation, let him stew in silence while the west’s dipping blaze pounded on their backs.

“I don’t know how to feel…” Zidane spoke up at last. “I feel kinda bad, but… really happy.”

“I guess when you get back to the Mist Continent you wanna go see ’er first thing, eh?” Blank suggested the obvious.

“I… I don’t know. I mean, I… I don’t know if I can. I don’t know how I’m gonna face her after all this time. What do I say? What’ll I do? What’s she gonna think? I don’t know…”

“You’ll think of somethin’. I’m sure she’ll be happy to see you again regardless.” Blank patted him roughly on the shoulder. “Hey, cut out all this self-doubt crap. It doesn’t sound like you at all.”

“…You’re right.” He looked back up, nothing better or worse about him. “Let’s go back.”

They found hut sweet hut again in time to fix supper. To cheat his way out of cooking Blank offered some jerky from his pack, though Zidane didn't take well to it. The dried meat rattled and knotted in his stomach until he was fairly sick and Blank broke down and boiled some thin soup.

"I don't know how you get by on one measly bowl of gruel a day," he'd grumble, yet no answer to that would be forthcoming.

Mikoto, Mr. 482 and Bobby Corwen returned the next afternoon to a miniature welcoming party. Souvenirs in the form of nuts and fruits were distributed to greedy little fingers. 352 admonished the youngsters over the importance of sharing politely and not sticking kupo nuts in places they didn't belong. 482 preserved some apples for his own pursuits; he was interested in the juice.

Zidane frequently dragged Blank into the village for drinks, having become interested in 482's successful concoctions. He related his enthusiasm to Blank over a sweet, tawny glass.

"I'm in love with fruit juice. Want some?"

“I’ve noticed. And no thanks.”

“It’s so tasty! And it doesn’t upset my stomach. And it doesn’t fuck me up.”

“Good for you. You’re like a damn kid, you know that?”

“Hehehe.” He downed the rest of his apple juice and smacked his lips. “Yum yum.”

“fuck”
“Eh? You say somethin’, Blank?”

Blank looked at him with wary suspicion. “No…”

“Oh. I thought you said—”

“fuck”
Both froze.
“fuck”
“Where’s that coming from…?” Zidane asked with slow, alert caution. Blank shook his head and began to scan 482’s porch with penetrating eyes and perked ears.
“fuck”
The redhead surreptitiously slid off of his chair and crept towards a large, overturned whicker basket, from which the faint, quack-like expletive seemed to

emanate. He gingerly took hold of its sides and lifted it up. Blank gaped at the squat Black Mage thus revealed.

“Duck!”

Duck belatedly realized that his cover was blown, turned up one look on Scary Patches and bolted for the door, chanting his newly acquired word like a bugle-call. “Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck!”

Blank sprinted after him and Zidane scrambled to follow suit, though the more athletic of the two was the first to reach a fork among the crowded houses and realize that his quarry had dodged him for good.

“Crap!” Blank punted the dust and cursed.

Zidane shortly ran up beside him. “You lost him?”

“Yes, damnit. Sonuva… Did somebody drop that kid’s egg or something? How much you wanna bet that’s gonna be his new favorite word for like, a week.”

“Alas, innocence lost,” Zidane poetically lamented. Blank turned on his insouciance.

“I’m glad you’re so blasé about it, considering he got it from you!”

Zidane shrugged. “I didn’t know he was right there! Wha’do you want me to do, chase him down and unteach him the word? It’s too late.”

“Tch.” Blank spit into a flower pot; its daisy shrugged off the blow. “Mikoto’s gonna kill us.”

“I could kill you,” Mikoto was reproaching Blank after Duck’s new favorite word made its rounds among his siblings before finally being relayed to her.

“You sound so cold about it, too. Cold-blooded murder,” Zidane supplied low-key commentary from the sidelines.

“Why are you yelling at *me*? Zidane was—”

“—behaving until you showed up!”

Zidane sniggered at the twisted logic.

“That’s only because until I showed up Zidane couldn’t even get out of bed, much less make trouble! Start talking sense, woman!”

“*Woman?*!” Mikoto balked at the label. She really had no idea for its total, unabridged connotations,

but she didn’t like the tone Blank had thrown behind it. “What do you mean by that?”

“I didn’t mean anything except that you need to chill out!”

“I am calm,” she boomed intimidatingly.

Zidane kept track of their heated banter, a grin spreading across his face as his focus increasingly lingered on the raving Mikoto.

“Look, it’s not like we told him what it *means*…” Blank was grasping at straws. “It’s not a big deal. He’ll grow out of it and find a new word eventually anyway.”

“I don’t even care about the word or what it means—to be honest I don’t know! It’s your bad influence—”

“You’ve really come alive!”

At this interruption, two steely glares from the combatants landed on Zidane. “What?” Mikoto puffed.

Her brother stood up and scratched the nape of his neck abashedly. “Sorry. I just meant that you’re so much more fun to watch when you’re angry. You look really vibrant. I always thought you were a real

stick-in-the-mud, so this side of you looks a lot better. Blank should piss you off more often."

"You're the one who got her pissed at me," Blank didn't fail to correct, albeit in a grumbled aside.

Mikoto, confounded by the mixed compliment, let her shoulders droop as all the hot air fled her lungs. She tried a response, but her lips only worked mutely against a blush that was shifting from rage to embarrassment. At last she turned and indignantly marched away, not another word spoken.

"Just like that," Blank marveled at the abrupt end to their spat. Zidane shrugged. Blank narrowed his eyes at him. "I hate you so much."

The Genome just laughed.

The grass was soft, the flowers smelled sweet, the birds were singing, the owls were napping and the sun was pleasantly warm. It was a scene straight out of a painting. Zidane took off his shirt and splayed over a flowerbed, one of the few open spots not packed with mud or riddled with pine needles. He bathed in the aroma of the earth and the radiance of the afternoon with hardly a care in his head. The

sunlight and fresh air made him tingle with life… or maybe he was cutting off the circulation to his arms laying that way. He shifted to a more comfortable position and drank a deep, contented sigh.

Before he knew it he'd drifted off. When he awoke the shorter pines were already scratching the sun's halo, birds weren't quite as verbose and he was powerfully thirsty. He rolled to his feet, picked up his shirt, lazily slung it over his shoulder and wandered back to the village.

On the way he encountered a couple of Genomes playing with the children. Bi, Zi and Ti were instructing the three younger in the fine art of tag. The Genomes, a pair of young girls by their looks, were sitting in for the tutorial. Zidane ambled up to the group and greeted them.

"What's up?"

Only the twin girls noticed his approach and greeted him in kind. "Hello." "Hello." They turned back around to watch Zi pry Duck's hand out of his own mouth and Ti yell over the rabble that there was no food in tag (to the others' dismay.)

"Hey!" Recognition lit Zidane's features. "You girls are the ones that came by and asked for soap a

few days ago, right? I thought I recognized you two."

The nearer girl giggled and nodded at him, started to look back to the tag affair, and then stopped short and did a double-take. She gasped and stared at Zidane with a queer, half-cocked look that didn't fail to unnerve him.

"Uh… what's wrong?"

With a fumbling bunt to the ribs the other girl's attention was drawn back. She twirled around, threw a baffled look to her companion, and then followed her focus to Zidane. After a moment she was struck with visible surprise. Her eyes bulged and her tail bristled.

Zidane couldn't make any sense between them. He set his hands on his hips, irked by the lack of response. "What's the deal with you two? Is there something on my face?"

They exchanged awkward glances. "Y-you should go see Chief," one of them haltingly recommended. The other furiously nodded.

Zidane walked away from the perplexing pair. "O… kay…" *'What was that about?'* He shrugged, left the kids to their diversion and headed for

Mikoto’s place, figuring that it was a good idea to check in anyway.

When he stuck his nose indoors it was instantly welcomed by the odor of steaming owls and peppers. He swung through the doorway and whistled. “Hey, something smells good. What’s up?”

Mikoto’s voice projected from her tiny kitchen. “Supper, soon. Where were you?”

“Just getting some fresh air.”

“Oh. Well, don’t run off.” She appeared from around the corner, a dripping ladle in hand. “Chili and stew are almost rea—Ahh!” She jumped back, her eyes wide on him and the large spoon flying from her grasp.

Zidane was reasonably taken aback. He stepped forward, braced for some kind of peril. “Whoa, what’s wrong?”

Blank appeared from the back door. His reaction was even more vitriolic.

“Yo, when’s supp—HOLY SHIT.”

Zidane dazedly looked behind him, beside him, into the next room, at the ceiling—the only thing he found misplaced was a spoon. When he looked back,

his roommates were still fixed on him, utterly aghast.

“What? *What?*!” he pressed, a little freaked out by now.

Mikoto couldn’t muster more than a blink. Blank could’ve won an award for the way he delivered the news.

“You’re green, guy.”

Zidane cocked his head and squinted at him. “What? *Green*? That’s not funny.”

Mikoto fidgeted as if she’d misplaced her own hand. “H-he’s right. You’re green all over.”

‘This is a joke.’ Testing their claim, Zidane backpedaled out the door, found the nearest waterhole and stared hard into his relatively undisturbed reflection.

As sure as the sky was blue, everywhere the bandages spared that the sun should’ve cooked red and crispy… was a deep, pervasive green.

His skin was fucking green.

“Holy shit!”

“Told you.”

“Well, I’ve been studying you for the past few days…”

Mikoto’s studying entailed poking and scratching to obtain crude blood and skin samples, and even then she admitted to not being able to do much as far as analyzing them. Zidane was put-off enough by the fact that he had a condition worth analyzing.

“Uh-huh.”

They were sitting up on Mikoto’s bed, the cool-headed scientist trying to explain to the brooding lab monkey a potential flaw in his biology.

“…and I have a theory, though I’m reluctant to believe it. I don’t know. It shouldn’t work. It’s biologically unsound. It’s physically impossible. And yet, looking at you… it’s working. I don’t know how, but it’s working.”

“Just hit me with it, already.”

Mikoto bit down her overflowing rationalizations and nodded. “Very well. It appears that the green pigmentation of your skin is directly related to

exposure to sunlight. The longer you stay out in the sun, the greener you become, and once you step in the shade the effect fades and you look normal again."

"I coulda told you that."

"Just let me review the facts. Although you are indeed getting stronger—In fact, I'd say you're recovering amazingly quickly—you haven't been eating much more than you did when you first woke up, so there doesn't appear to be a relationship there—which, I might add, doesn't make a lick of sense. You shouldn't even be *surviving*, much less improving, on so little nourishment."

As an answer for this conundrum, Zidane put forth his most scientific hypothesis. "Shit happens…?"

She smirked at the colloquialism and continued. "Now, let's consider your observation that you always feel better when sitting outside, although it makes you especially thirsty. Consider as well that plants take their nourishment through a chemical reaction in their cells between sunlight and water, among other things—"

"Mikoto…"

“—and that much of this reaction takes place in the chloroplasts, which bear a characteristic green color… Do I have to explain where this is going?”

He swallowed dryly, considering her logical conclusion. “…I’m a vegetable.”

“No, no!” Mikoto recoiled from the harsh term, but then recanted. “Well… yes. In a sense. More like a lichen, actually.”

“A lichen? You mean that stuff that grows on rocks?”

“Lichens are composite organisms made up of fungi and algae. The fungus provides a body—a host, if you will, for the algae. The algae uses photosynthesis to provide nutrients to both itself and the fungus. A lichen is pretty much two organisms living in one body.”

“The heck does that have to do with me?”

“You’re the fungus.”

He groaned and fell forward, curling into a ball. “How…?” the ball whined.

“I don’t know, but I’m sure Iifa had something to do with it.”

"…" the ball said.

"Zidane, what did Iifa do to you?"

"…Just tell me, what does all this mean?"

"Well, I'm not sure, to be honest. I don't have the means to run the kinds of tests I want to. I'm just speculating, but it seems like you have plant cells—or at least plant-like cells, perhaps indeed algae—dispersed throughout your skin, and these become particularly active when you're in the sun. The algae could be using photosynthesis to provide your body with energy, which would supplement your normal diet. It would explain why you don't need to eat so much."

Zidane straightened with a new thought. "Wait, that doesn't make sense. I've only been going outside for the past few days. You make it sound like this has been going on all along. How can it if I've been staying inside all that time?"

"I said these plant-like cells become *especially* active in direct sunlight. That's not to say they aren't working all the time in dim light. I just told you about lichens; they work the same way. How many green lichens have you ever seen?"

“No—but—it’s just—that shouldn’t be enough, should it? I mean, it still doesn’t make sense, does it? I mean, I… it’s… So now I’m a fungus, too?” he asked pitifully, as if begging it not be true.

“Don’t be ridiculous. I was using a metaphor. Besides, it’s just speculation. I’m only really guessing about this, and I wish I had a way to know for sure, but from here I’d say you’re in some kind of mutual dependency with this plant matter. You provide sunlight and water, and the plant-material gives back some energy. In a nutshell, you’re eating plant food. I don’t know how your body achieved this kind of symbiotic relationship, but that’s what it looks like.”

He put on a stark, hollow mask that stared straight ahead into nowhere. She wondered if he would be sick before he could digest this revelation. “Mikoto…?” he uttered faintly.

“Yes?”

“Don’t ever say that word again.”

“What? What word?”

“That S-one.”

She furrowed her brow, lost. “…Symbiotic?”

“Yeah, that one. Just… don’t. Please.”

“Can I even ask why?”

“My boss used to say, ‘A friend’ll ask what happened. A good friend’ll ask what’s wrong. A true friend won’t ask.’…Please don’t ask.”

It was irrational and she didn’t understand, but his plea was so earnest she didn’t ask. She couldn’t see the cause for such distress, though it was fair to assume that such a seemingly innocuous word touched a bruised part of his psyche.

“As you wish,” she acquiesced.

He sighed, wilting a little as some color returned to his cheeks. “I can’t believe this. I’m a damn lichen.”

“Metaphorically,” she didn’t hesitate to correct him. “And I don’t think this is necessarily bad. I’d make the best of it if I were you.”

“Huh,” he huffed, ducking his gaze and narrowing his eyes at the nearest bedpost.

“Seriously. I mean, this condition—whatever you choose to call it—it seems to be helping you. You are feeling better, right?”

He shrugged, grudging to admit it was so.

“Look.” Mikoto held out her hands, delicately importuning his submission to the quirky truth. “I’m not going to pretend to know what happened, much less how to reverse it, and even if I could I’m not sure I’d want to. Aside from the small appetite and looking like a chameleon every time you step outside—” He scowled at her. “I can’t see any adverse effects. The animal and planet cells in your body seem to be in perfect balance.”

“So you’re saying this is all *okay*?”

“I’m just saying that the sooner you accept this aspect of yourself, the better.”

Zidane sighed and stared vacantly at the floor below the windowsill, his countenance tangled between expressions of befuddlement and defeat. He sighed noisily and appeared at last reconciled with the facts as Mikoto gave them. She let out a hidden breath, relieved that he had at least taken the news better than that of Vivi’s demise.

“…I’m not gonna be sproutin’ leaves outta my head or somethin’, am I?”

“I…” She blinked back some bizarre imagery. “…hope not.”

To keep doing what you set your heart on…
It's a very hard thing to do.
We were all so courageous…

He didn't sprout leaves, though the villagers had a difficult time recognizing the lime Genome that meandered back to Chief's hut in the evening as the same one that left it in the morning to go drowsing on a knoll overlooking the cemetery.

Zidane was pretty much back to normal, if a little on the green and scrawny side. After giving her brother one final looking-over Mikoto fairly assessed that the only scratches that would stick were the etchings on his back, and those were easy enough to hide. After the slow and steady weeks recuperating, the smothering bandages were at last stripped away and talks began under Mikoto's roof about her Tantalus-sent tenants packing up and leaving for Lindblum. Without fuss or contest between the three a date was set and Blank and Zidane prepared to say goodbye to their gracious hosts: mages, Genomes, moogle, chocobo and all.

Vivi's kids were rife with disappointment and resisted their departure at every turn. Zidane could never forget the way Ti clung to his leg as she

begged him to stay and play with her and her siblings forever. A very paternal side of him wanted to comply, but more potent obligations decidedly won over.

On the eve of goodbye, after an atypically crowded and boisterous supper in the commons that ultimately segued into a barbeque for the whole village, Zidane snuck away and took one more walk along the flowerbeds, stopping on his favorite hill and settling in to watch the sun sink out of reach.

When Mikoto found him, he was humming some tune she didn't recognize.

"What's that song?"

"Hmm?" He twisted sharply around to watch the pink-clad Genome approach from behind. Recognizing her, he relaxed and resumed sun-watching. "Oh, nothing."

"Oh. Well, what are you looking at?"

"Light. Colors. I love all this… life. It's beautiful."

'Ironic comment to make over a graveyard,' Mikoto thought. She bit her lip, looking down into

the tiny, steaming cup she nursed in her hands. “I brought you some tea.”

He perked up, intrigued. “Tea? For me?”

She nodded affirmative and passed the cup to him, which he gratefully received. “Aww, thanks! Haven’t tried tea in a long time.”

Mikoto brushed some bothersome twigs out of the shaggy grass and took a seat beside him. They looked out at the molten copper disc gliding through amethyst clouds into the cradle of an amber sky, the brilliant thread of fire rimming the forest valley’s craggy cirque and the gilded spread of trees tumbling out of the foothills like a leafy tsunami at standstill, the crest of which reined in short of a field paved with dust and packed with more scarecrows than ever would be cornstalks.

Light. Colors.

“Vivi and I used to sit and eat dinner here,” she passively remarked as her eyes scoured the grotesque caricatures for the one with the floppiest hat. The sunset laced her fine, fair features with gold and set ablaze drifting, reclusive hairs that would not be tied back.

Life.

“Really? It’s nice here. Very peaceful-like, isn’t it?”

She stretched out her slender legs before her, letting the earth’s lukewarm carpet tickle the backs of her knees. “Yes, I suppose it is.”

Zidane set down the emptied teacup and hummed appreciatively. “That was good. Tasted different. What kind of tea was it?”

“Tally weed,” she answered without looking back at him.

“Huh. Never heard of it.”

“I collected some during my trip.”

“Ah. Hey, Mikoto.” He gave her a stretching look, itching to have it reciprocated. “Listen, I owe you big time, for everything. I wouldn’t be sitting here alive right now if it weren’t for you. If there’s any way I can ever repay you, just ask.”

She shook her head. “You don’t owe me anything. It is all of us who are grateful to you.”

“Huh?”

“It is thanks to you that all of us in the village have a second chance. If you had not rescued us

from Terra…”

He languidly waved off the tail of her clause. “That wasn’t anything. I was just doing what anybody would’ve done.”

“If that’s what you think… then I was just doing what anyone would’ve done, returning the favor by helping you get well. Can you consider us even, then?”

“Eheheh. You’re a stiff negotiator. Let’s call it even, then.”

She looked his way and thinly smiled. Mikoto then noticed his unbuttoned shirt and wondered if he was taking in some lingering sunlight, yet. “Oh, you’re not green?” she observed out loud.

“Ah?” He checked his pale front. “Oh, it usually takes ten or twenty minutes, you know. I just got here. Give it aaaaanny minute now.”

“Ah. I see. Or, I will see,” she amended.

“…I’ve changed. I didn’t really think about it before now, but I have. I mean, not just physically. The way I look at life is different. It’s never felt so precious before, just being alive. I mean, I… am I

even making sense? Do you know what I'm talking about?"

"I don't know." Mikoto drew her knees up to her chin and watched the luminous polish melt off the caps of magegraves. "Since I've come to this village, I've had a lot of time to think about life on Gaia, and the way life was—or wasn't, really—on Terra. I began to question whether Terra's plan was right, after all. I thought a lot about it, actually."

"And what did you decide? Was it right?"

"I still don't know. I felt… I used to feel like it was a living being's natural right to do whatever it can to survive. Life consumes and tramples other life all the time in the name of survival. That's the law of nature.

"But when I thought about what Terra was doing, trying to consume a whole other world for its survival… I just wonder if that was part of the law of nature, too. I wonder if it was a matter of Gaia's will to live being more powerful than Terra's that finally brought Terra's downfall, and not necessarily the actions of you or Kuja alone, or Garland's failure."

“The will to live is a powerful thing… I think I understand now a lot of the reasons Garland had for doing what he did. And Iifa, too.”

“Iifa?”

“Iifa was supposed to destroy Gaia, after Terra was destroyed, but she—it didn’t. Iifa didn’t destroy Gaia in the end because it wanted to live, too. Iifa defied its purpose to defend its right to live.

“Just being alive… maybe that’s the most important thing in this world. Just living. It doesn’t matter so much how much time we have, just what we do with it. All we can do is live every moment to the fullest, you know?”

Mikoto meditated on his words, took a full, quiet breath and straightened. Her bearing resolved then, as if she had made up not just her mind, but her entire being.

Zidane checked himself once more. “Damn, there I go. Green again. I guess I’ve changed a lot physically too, huh? I don’t know what Dagger’s going to think. You think she’ll find me… repulsive?”

“I don’t know. Some might consider it an appealing trait.” A grin colored her cool mien. “It

certainly is from an evolutionary standpoint."

"Heh. Yeah, I bet the chicks really dig guys in camouflage." His tone was jovial despite sarcasm.

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about that." Her tail furtively twined around his.

"Oh? What makes you say that?"

She reached over the grass and kissed him; it was hesitant, yet not half-assed. Every pore of his being cringed with alarm and excitement as her tongue grazed his lips. His mind pulled the brakes on some effervescing urges. *'Whoa!'* He dizzily pushed her away and caught his breath. "Mikoto, I…" He shook his head, veering his gaze away from her spellbinding blue eyes. *'Oh shit, oh shit,'* he berated himself, *'I shoulda seen this coming. Wait, who could see this coming? I sure didn't. Shit.'*

"…I see," she said with dignified resignation. "It's that Dagger woman, isn't it?"

'Well, yes, for starters.'

"I—it—" he stammered a bit before composing a clear, sincere message. "Mikoto… It's just not like that between us."

Mikoto looked sullenly at the ground. “No, it’s not,” she didn’t refute their status. “And it doesn’t matter. I’m not going to see you again, either way.”

‘What? What gave her that idea?’
“Hey, that’s not true,” he carefully corrected her, tiptoeing around her feelings lest he squash them. He was treading uncharted territory; he’d never seen the stoic Mikoto stirred to this kind of display (to anger, on the other hand…) and he had no idea how to get his footing here.

“You’re going to go home,” she insisted, her voice calm and steady like the ‘still wind’ she was named for. It was gradually building to something, though, like thunderheads climbing the obscure side of a mountain, yet to break into the valley. “You’re not going to come back for a long time, if at all, and then only briefly, for visits. I might as well never see you again.”

Not denying this, “You could… come with me?” Zidane suggested apologetically.

“No…” She shook her head, her blonde locks swaying like a curtain over her face. “I wouldn’t belong. I’m not even sure if I belong here, but…” She tugged on a shaky breath and confronted herself. “These people need me. I can’t leave them.”

Zidane ran out of consolations. He could always deal out a cool line or charmed word to put even a storm at ease, and it almost always worked but—*damnit*—nothing came. He didn't know how to argue his case. He didn't know what exactly his case was. "Mikoto…"

"Listen, I…" She finally looked up and he was caught by her mask, stone-calm and serious save the tears pooling in her eyes. "There's only one thing I want before we part ways. You're leaving in the morning with Blank, right? And tonight, I… I…" It was too much to propose out loud to his face, so she turned to the grass again, her fierce yet timid desires throwing her prostrate before him. "I want to spend tonight with you. Just give me one night. You'll never have anything to do with me again, and I… but I… I want something—some moment—to remember you by."

He couldn't play stupid to this. Even though she didn't explicitly say it, Mikoto's meaning was plain and open, like large, bold type on a storefront.

She turned those tearing, entrancing eyes on him again and for a tense, breathless moment he considered her—by gods, he *considered* it, and that act alone both revolted his sensibilities and incited

so many repressed feelings for her (*she's awfully pretty—beautiful, even—NO, I can't. She's like my little sister. Doesn't that bother her at all? Is it a culture thing? Do Terrans just not think about family like that? We're not really family—not technically I guess—what am I thinking? You don't do that with family. It's sick, it's wrong. I mean, even if she's not really related to me she feels like family—though she feels like more sometimes—no, no I can't I'm going home I'll see Dagger, Dagger's waiting, beautiful wonderful Dagger I miss her so much when I was with her I felt like I could do anything, anything in the world just for her I know she's the one I promised I'd go back I can't do this even if she never found out if no one found out I wouldn't be able to live with myself—but Mikoto she's looking at me like that so lonely so needy I can help her can't I? It's just one night, right? Damnit Zidane be stronger than this just say no yeah her feelings'll be hurt but so what about Dagger Oh man she really is pretty hot those eyes are driving me crazy so sexy*)

Once she kissed him again it didn't matter if his mind was made up or not. It was too late and he was too hot and muddled to go back and think about it.

His next memories were fragmented. He remembered following her to a mixed grove that hid

behind the cemetery—no, he only remembered being there, not how he got there. She had led him like a blind chocobo. He couldn't believe what he was about to do. He was enveloped in some heady trance he couldn't break out of to save his life. He remembered her eyes, crystalline and burning with lonely passion, as if he were her only chance to know a man in the carnal or any sense thereafter, and he was overtaken by her unspoken desperation.

(He thought of Dagger)

Zidane didn't feel any way he could turn back, now. Once he reconciled this course of action with himself things suddenly became very clear and placid, and his senses were with him again. He began to approach the act coolly, as if it were a job, his only mind to satisfy the customer.

(He thought of Susan)

He was on his back in the grass and dead leaves that crackled under his squirming weight. Mikoto was upon him, pulling off his shirt, kissing his bony, calloused neck… They were a part of the earth, sunlight-freckled like the pines and dogwoods and twitching and giggling like the shallow brook and sighing like the easy breeze—One of his hands roamed over the smooth fabric of her skirt and dug around her trim waist; the other slipped under her

sweater and found a breast, fingers nimble and artful just as they were while parting the straps of vulnerable purses or a wench's bra or skimming across the smooth, delicate pages of a screenplay—
(He thought of Ruby, bucking and yelling)
A tiny, upturned twig stabbed one of his fresh scars, and he winced not so much for the stinging pain as for the reminder that he really wasn't so virile as he was two years ago and all his faculties weren't quite together yet…
"Um," he mumbled like a drunken fool, subdued by shame, 'Ah, um… I dunno… if I can do this.'
(*"I'm lame. I couldn't anyway."*)
She hesitated, rearing back a little to meet him face-to-face. "Why?" she gasped through a whisper.

Realizing how she misinterpreted his doubt, he doubled over his remark, "Oh, ah, it's not that, I mean… I, um…" He stole a meaningful glance at his groin, which she followed.

"Oh." She grinned and chuckled, relieved somehow, though he couldn't see what was funny. Was she making fun of him? *Damnit, this was a mistake…*

"I wouldn't worry about that," she announced flippantly while flinging a wisp of hair out of her

face. A mischievous spark lit her eyes, something that very nearly scared him.

Zidane squinted at her leerily. “What are you…?”

She leaned close, snuffing out his question with a deep kiss. “I said not to worry,” she purred huskily in his ear while an unseen hand unwound his belt and tossed it aside. Through her veil of short-cropped hair he could descry her other hand—*glowing*—sneaking into his breeches and loosing some sorcery on him—probably of the ilk that lured him into this position to begin with.

*’Magic magic she’s using magic on me I knew it what the hell kind of magic can doOoooh*hhh. “He drew a hissing breath as cold fingers laced with energy slid across his inner thigh, and turned out a deep-rooted moan as *everything* about him sprang to life. He didn’t realize before then how much he *really* needed this—how he ached and longed to get inside a woman like the days gone now where he’d buy off a barmaid or one of Posik’s girls to warm the bed he’d rented from some shabby inn, lest he return too cold and his purse too full to the clock tower and straw-stuffed ticking in a dingy loft—some nights he shared the bed and girl with Blank, just enough gil between them for one room and one ride each—

Mikoto seemed to delight at her success and his wails of rejuvenation. “How’d… you…” her victim panted. She didn’t stop for questions. She loved him with all her magic, all her body and none of her sense, and he drank in her euphoria like a famished, dirty, lusty thing, again and again until dusk became twilight became night.

He gave her the night.

The black trees reached over them, the cool, fuzzy earth lay beneath them, his blood still rushed in his ears and his skin buzzed with heat and sweat and she was at his side—on his side—her arm draped around his bare middle. He brushed her soft hair away from her pretty face and stroked her naked thigh, dabbling in her subtle, simple beauty. Somewhere in the background the stars and moons watched while the owls whooped a ghastly serenade. It felt like eternity under the sapphire heavens, an eternity not waiting for anyone and not going anywhere.

And now, in the aftermath, Zidane had time to think.

It was strange, how guilty he didn’t feel. Even Susan’s services, “back in the day” (though he tipped her well), were a guilty pleasure, but this was neither guilt nor pleasure. It sure as hell wasn’t “making love.” It was something both engaged in with—what? Relief? Satisfaction? Freedom? Yes, something like those, but then not quite. Maybe there was a little pleasure, after all. He didn’t have a word for the way he felt. Perhaps he was too far conditioned by the fine art of wenching to think much of a little escapade in the thick of the night, and that was the root of his indifference. There was a piece of him yet—his conscience, maybe—nagging him to feel remorse, but he couldn’t will it so.

Remorse for what? For having sex? No, he’d done that plenty before, and certainly under more… compromising circumstances (the heavens forbid Boss catch him sneaking a girl into the hideout’s loft), yet guilt wasn’t a factor then like it wasn’t a factor now.

Because he forced her? All hells no. The opposite was sooner true. It wasn’t even his idea. Where Mikoto got the wild notion to seduce him, he’d never know (though he’d admit he was rather flattered).

Because he did it with Mikoto? And what did that mean, exactly? Was Mikoto different from the other girls he'd slept with? Should he even try to compare her to the others?

Because he'd already sworn himself to Dagger? Pledged his heart to the Queen of Alexandria, that brilliant singing canary, behind backs and to the bottom of foamy mugs? Vowed to return to her as soon as he could right before stepping off the event horizon into foolish heroism? Friendship? What was it?
(*symbiosis*)
(*"And from where you're sittin' now, was it worth it?"*)…

Well.

He wanted to be with Dagger. He wanted to be the one for her. He had yet to declare any such feelings, in the official sense. But he would. He planned to, someday, hopefully? Could he? Could it even work? How he could consider such plans right there and still not yet be touched by guilt only complicated the mystery. Why did he feel so… so?

Because, if it all meant nothing—if it didn't count, he was using Mikoto, then? Or was she using him? It seemed they used each other. Both

consented. Neither complained. No big deal was made about it.

(*“It didn’t mean anything because we didn’t know any better.”*) Blank… it *was* stupid, wasn’t it? Just child’s play. Stupid children. And he does know now, but better?

Because Mikoto’s like family? Because sex is the best and worst way to violate that kind of bond? But his reasoning had already exhausted that avenue, and he at last failed to categorize his relationship with her. Perhaps that was why he couldn’t feel strongly about what they had done, one way or the other. They didn’t really mean anything to each other, but then they did—at least enough to merit intercourse, but then perhaps only that. His time with her and the things they did together were magically divorced from any deep or personal meaning, but then at the same time they were the closest of companions, drawn together by circumstance.

Given everything, Zidane fairly felt obliged to coin the phrase “platonic sex.” Is that possible? He thought of the Mikoto in his dream, Garland’s little harlot—he thought of Blank in the attic—Iifa in the dark—then he stopped—thinking too much hurt his head. Or he was thinking with the wrong head. Or

both.
Or just *not thinking*—a conflux of all of the above got him into this mess to begin with.
If he'd call it a mess.
Was it?

GODDAMNIT BRAIN, SHUT UP.

Relax, relax, enjoy the moment, enjoy the feel of her soft skin, the throbbing, warm heartbeat, the cool grass and the trees and the moons…

…tomorrow it won't matter…

He slept.

What to do when I felt lonely…
That was the only thing you couldn't teach me.
But we need to figure out the answer for ourselves…

The owls whooped at the rising sun, heckling the closing of their hour and the impending onslaught of bright, boring day. The Genome pair arose lazily against the backdrop of fowls' complaints and scavenged for their own clothing amid the leaf-bed.

Zidane's mind was swimming with questions—questions he should've asked beforehand.

“Why did we do this?”

“Because I wanted to.” She made it sound quaintly simple, and he could sense her strength in authority, something he hadn’t ever expected to be subject to.

“Nice answer. That kind of brings us to, well… Why me? You coulda had any other guy in the village… all three of them.” The remark was, sadly, only exaggerated by a handful, counting the Black Mages.

“Hehe.”

He poked her ribs, goading response. “Com’on, tell me.”

“Because… none of the others are like you.”

“Way to not answer the question, Miss Mikoto,” he lauded her evasiveness. “Com’on, I really wanna know what makes me so special. I know you’re not attracted to me. Not physically, anyway.”

She coyly bunched up her shoulders. “What makes you say that?”

“Well, it’s—I—” he sputtered emphatically. “Look at me: I’m a scratched-up, beat-up, skinny

little scarecrow. *You* have more meat on you than I do.”

“Are you calling me fat?” she tested him, kidding still.

“Hey, unfair angle of attack! You know what I mean. And you’re still totally avoiding my question.”

She hummed airily, deliberately avoiding his gaze.

“Com’on. You coulda had Blank. He thinks you’re hot.”

“I didn’t want Blank. I want you.”

He scooted oppressively close, stifling her avoidant tendencies. “And this brings us back to… why?”

“Because.” She pushed him away. “You’re too nosy! I’m done of you,” she said with haughtiness (of the mock variety, for once) and rose to her feet.

“Oh, ouch. Cast aside. My heart breaks,” he fanned her melodrama, rolling on the ground and feigning death throes.

She lightly kicked him. “Stop that silliness. We need to go meet Blank. He might be worrying about us.”

‘As well he should,’ Zidane’s suppressed conscience remarked as together they began to walk back to the village. He didn’t feel like any of his issues were resolved.

‘*Why did we do this?’* He still didn’t know. Was he sick? Was he stupid? He had felt a little of both, actually, and was still groggy yet. Was it the magic? No, he didn’t see her cast any spell in the beginning, but did that necessarily rule it out? Why would she stoop to such tactics just to get laid? Mikoto wasn’t *that* kind of person. Magic didn’t leave little hangovers either, no matter the spell’s intended effect. No, it was more like he had drowned under the influence of some degenerate drug. But that’s just as silly; he didn’t take any—

Wait.

“Mikoto.” He stopped and waited for her to follow suit.

“What’s wrong?”

“What was in that tea?”

He was sure she didn’t mean for him to see her tail bristle. “What? What are you talking about?”

“You know what I’m talking about. That tea you gave me yesterday. What was in it?”

Her jaw clenched with her knuckles. “I told you, it was tally weed. I got it from Conde Petie. Why are you asking?”

“What else was in it? What is tally weed, anyway?”

She could have become indignant. She could have puffed up and planted her hands on her hips. She could have asked what he was accusing her of in that narrowing, strict voice she’d scolded Blank with. She only bowed her head and turned out, quiet as the mice sheltering beneath her feet from risk of being plucked into the air by hungry owls, “Nothing else. Just tally weed. The dwarves said it would… it was…”

Zidane stepped up to her, grabbing her arms to anchor any flight. “It was what? It was *what*, Mikoto?”

“It’s…” She had no skill, no grace for lying—she was no thief or actor like the Tantalus-sent—and wouldn’t even attempt it, knowing she’d only

exacerbate the consequences for when he found out the truth anyway. “It’s an aphrodisiac.”

“What!” It wasn’t a question. He knew well enough what it was, if from nowhere else than Blank’s specially brewed “love potions,” after Zidane had once asked after its ingredients.

A stiff, scared sob shook her. “I… I’m sorry! I thought if—maybe if you—if I could endear you to me somehow, you wouldn’t—you would stay. I didn’t want to, I mean, except as a last resort, and you’re leaving this morning—I thought…”

He backed away, throwing his hands and several maledictions up to the owl colony. “God dammit! I can’t believe it!” In a fury, he spun away from the sight of her and crouched against the mushroom-festooned trail, furling his long cat-tail around himself as if it were a broad, thick shell to hide in.

“Zidane…” Her feet were petrified in their boots. She couldn’t move, to or away from him.

He dropped to kneel, spitting gradually dimming curses at the earth. *She wasn’t that kind of person*, he’d just finished telling himself.

Mikoto waited for the swearing to subside and even the owls to still before she dared near him

again.

“Mikoto.” He stood up and sighed. “Look, what you did…” He paused, the moment of irony on his lips and all its ethical implications staring him in the face. It was perfectly all right to snare loose girls from the bar with a love potion as long as he was doing the snaring, but when a girl got the better of *him*? How could he tell her with straight-faced, righteous conniption that she was in the wrong and he never was?

When he at last turned to face her something was reconciled in his eyes. To look into them set Mikoto back with a sudden feeling of sympathy, or even deep, understanding kinship. At any rate the glint of anger had passed away, already clouded over.

“Okay, so what you did was wrong. I can sorta understand why you did it though, and you probably didn’t know any better, being new to Gaia and all, but the fact is that you shouldn’t, well—” He was loathe to use the phrase ‘take advantage of,’ as it would imply that he was. “You don’t do that to friends, you know? You should have just asked, for starters. But even then, you know why I can’t stay.”

“…I know.”

“You did? But then you still went through with… you know… anyway? Why?”

“You said it yourself.”

He was surprised to be struck with his own quote.

“Live life to the fullest, right? Make every moment count. That’s what you said. Even if I couldn’t make you stay, I wanted to make just one moment count… with you.”

He scratched his head, suitably at wits with what his words had wrought. “I, eheh, didn’t quite mean it like *that*. But, um… wow. I had no idea you felt this way about me.”

She folded her hands behind her back and bit her lip, not confirming one word nor the other. He treated her affection as a novelty—a game—not a commitment, she could tell. His nonchalance stung almost as much as his rejection.

“I know you have to, but I still don’t want you to go. I’ll… It’ll be lonely without you. I want you to stay in the village with me and the children. If you stay, Blank can go back and tell everyone you’re dead. No one will know better. They think you’re dead already.”

That Mikoto even dreamed of that alternative alarmed him. He shook his head. “Mikoto… I can’t. I can’t do that to my friends. I can’t do that to myself. I’d be living a lie.”

It was futile, she finally accepted, to hold him down. Even if she could, it would be a sin, like caging a bird that only wanted to fly to its mate. She never knew how before, but she wanted to cry. She then realized that the act had preempted her want, her cheeks already wet. She turned her face down to hide the brackish streams trickling from her eyelids. She wasn’t used to showing emotion. It was weakness, Garland said; it crumbled men’s resolve and challenged their loyalties. She wasn’t used to being at the mercy of a *feeling*—an abstraction she couldn’t articulate or hold on to. She wasn’t used to the reversal in her position, to being consoled, as opposed to conducting herself with quiet dignity and strength that others could root comfort in. She was supposed to be the leader, the stronghold.

Even so, for all her suppositions, when he stepped forward and hugged her she crumbled in his arms, sniffling and weeping uncontrollably. Zidane only embraced her snugly, warmly, as she beat him with tiny, flailing fists and curses.

“Shh, shh. Don’t cry.”

“I hate you Zidane Tribal,” she sobbed. She hated him for everything he had brought into her life: Black Mages and water that wouldn’t sit still and death and birth. She hated the way he turned her life upside-down every time he appeared, first in Bran Bal, and then when she had finally grown comfortable in the village, by her lonesome self. “We’re all going to miss you terribly.”

“I know. It’s okay.” He held her at arm’s length and wiped off a tear from under one of her eyes. “Hey, get a hobby! Make some friends! Don’t be such a stiff! I know you’ll be okay. And I’ll come back. I will. I’ll visit you and the kids as often as I can.”

His light heart made her feel silly again. She huffed. “Promise?”

He nodded sincerely. “Promise. Now com’on. Let’s go back.”

He casually jabbed her along and she walked with him, still never figuring out how and why he always put her heart at ease like so.

It was weird all the rest of the morning in that nothing was weird at all. It was as if nothing had happened the night before. No hint, no suggestion, no regret, no awkwardness, nothing more to say on it.

They were like children. It was just a game.

It was not yet light enough to wake the village, and they were welcomed back only by deserted, dusty roads and dark, muted windows.

Mikoto excused herself to fetch something from the windmill. Zidane slipped into her hut once more for a fresh change of clothes before he left. He wondered if there was something meaningful or satirical about donning the blue jacket and baggy, striped trousers a Mr. numbersomething (he'd forgotten, something he wasn't proud of) had posthumously donated for him to wear. In the ensemble he looked like a veritable Black Mage, sans-hat, and it creeped him out a little to dwell on the outfit's former occupant. It was comfortable garb, nevertheless, and he'd surely find more fitting street clothes once he got to Lindblum.

One thing he noticed when he entered the bedroom that last time was the skillet on his pillow. Glancing overhead, he noticed that very thing

missing from the ceiling's gallery, only a loose string dangling in its place.

'Looks like it finally fell. If I had went to bed last night it would've fallen right on my head.'

He didn't entertain any weird thoughts on it, and instead walked back into the village to search for Blank. Blank's wrath found him first.

"Where the hell were you?" He was leaning against the guardrail of the water walk, decked out for the road already, a dagger sheathed at his belt and his eyes aiming the same at the delinquent blonde.

"Er… hi Blank?" he tread carefully around the fellow thief.

"Whatever!" The redhead shook an open fist at Zidane with disgust. "I was lookin' all over the village for you and Mik. What the hell happened? Where were you two last night?"

"We went for a walk in the woods and got lost," Mikoto hastily supplied as she rounded the corner of the inn and approached the two, a piece of paper in hand. 'We didn't know how to get back in the dark, so we stayed out the night.' Seeing by his pursed lips and wrinkled nose that Blank wasn't quite

satisfied, she talked ahead, plowing over his contentions. “You don’t need to get all ruffled about it; we’re both fine now, as you can see. Zidane protected me, didn’t you Zidane?”

Devil! She was more deceptive than she looked, after all. “Ah, yeah! That’s what happened,” Zidane collaborated with the tale.

Blank snorted distastefully. “Whatever. You ready to go, veggie-boy?”

“Oh,” Mikoto forestalled the other Genome. ‘Um, I almost forgot. Before you leave.’ She took the folded paper she’d brought and handed it to Zidane. “This letter is for you.”

(*“No one will know better. They think you’re dead already.”*)
“Huh? A letter?” He was naturally surprised. Who knew to write him a letter? He could imagine few suspects offhand, though it was quicker to ask than to deliberate. “For me? From who?”

“From Vivi.”

The silence that descended over the covered walk was palpable.

“Vivi?” Zidane echoed quietly as he turned the neat, yellow parchment over in his hands, his jaded thief hands yet hesitant to steal its unsealed contents. He looked to Mikoto. “When did he…?”

“It was found shortly after he stopped.”

Blank and Mikoto watched him expectantly, wondering if he’d spill over this vestige of his lost friend right there, but Zidane instead pocketed it.

“Well.” He turned to Blank. “Let’s go, shall we?”

I’m so happy I met everyone…
I wish we could’ve gone on more adventures.
But I guess we all have to say goodbye someday.

On the way out Zidane encountered Nuef, bright and early at feeding Bobby Corwen. The chocobo caretaker was at first perplexed that someone would accost him for something other than permission to ride Bobby, apparently not accustomed to being approached on a familiar level. Zidane pulled Nuef aside and asked him rather vaguely yet insistently to take care of his chief and try to be friends with her. Nuef was hard of understanding, but he fast realized he wouldn’t be rid of this entreater until he obliged.

Zidane roughly if affably patted him on the back with some encouraging words, and then bid Nuef and his charge farewell and caught up to Blank.

The Tantalus brethren hiked through the forest labyrinth. The sunrise shred the trees into golden rods and splintered shadows. The monsoon breathed rebirth into the hoary wood and callow leaves. The dead Fall crunched under their feet while promisingly eternal Spring blossomed overhead. It wasn't fair to call it a dying forest anymore. It was a maze of second chances and new life sprouting from the ashes of the old.
Zidane felt like the Phoenix, flying home.

"You shagged her."

The spell was broken. Zidane was knocked off-balance, throwing Blank a wild, caught look. The redhead stopped walking to return a long, hard glare.

"I—it's…" Zidane sighed, seeing no use in denying it. "Yes."

"What were you thinking?"

"How did you know?"

"It was written all over both your faces. I'm not stupid, you know."

Zidane realized that he didn't give Blank near enough credit when it came to reading people. "… Are you mad at me?"

Blank rolled his shoulders in a shrug and spit into a pile of pine needles. "Fuckit. No. Actually, I started to smell it coming. I just didn't think either of you'd actually… goddamn. You're a real bastard, fucking your little sister while talkin' high about going home to see Dagger. After all the shit Garnet's been goin' through, waiting for you to come back, and you're just screwing around. I hope you feel good about yourself right now."

Finally—*finally*—guilt struck. Zidane hung his head, unable to ignore or justify last night to anyone anymore.

"I know. I'm a bastard. I just… she just…" Just a game. Just play.

Blank turned away with another aloof shrug and started walking again. "Ah, screw it some more. It isn't any of my business. I don't care who you fool around with. Just don't lie to me about it again. Can't stand being bullshitted."

"Blank, wait." Zidane's breath was ragged from the panic of losing his words. Blank obediently

paused and waited, his arms crossed and his back turned to his stammering friend.

“I—I’m sorry. You’re right. I shouldn’t of done it and I shouldn’t of lied about it. I just didn’t want to hurt Mikoto’s feelings. I didn’t want to her to think you knew.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Yeah, well…” Zidane felt so awkward, it was a reflex to justify his actions. Even if he couldn’t *win*, per say, at least he could make Blank comfortable with the whole truth. He jogged up to Blank’s side and initiated a narrative. “She started it all, you know! You shoulda seen it! She was all over me.”

Blank lashed back with an incredulous finger. “*She* came on to *you*? I mean it, don’t bullshit me.”

“It’s true! I swear on Tatta’s grave.”

Tatta was a Tantalus, once. Good man; knew everything in the world about picking locks; passed on his secrets to Blank; died in a rumble with a rival gang, many years ago. Invoking his name was to speak with utmost earnestness amongst the Tantalus troupe; it was not something uttered frivolously.
In the spirit of their dearly departed comrade, Blank heard Zidane out as he related the events of the last

evening up to the “too much information” watermark. Blank cursed at the absurdity of it all, but took it granted for truth.

“Tally weed? Damn,” he lamented. “She seemed like such a nice girl, too.”

Zidane smirked. “You say that like she isn’t anymore.”

“*You* say that like you wanted to be duped.”

“Well, only after the fact. Duh.”

Blank mentioned a few deities’ names in vain and cuffed the blonde upside the head. “Ya damn idiot. I can’t believe—no, hell, I *can* believe you’d get yourself in a spot like that, but… goddamn. There somethin’ wrong with you? She’s your fucking sister, man.”

Zidane prudently decided against jumping on a pun. “Well, not technically…”

“Technical, smechnical. You know what I mean.”

“Look, she obviously didn’t feel that way, else she wouldn’t of… you know! I don’t know what to tell you, Blank.”

The redhead sighed. “Look, I don’t care anymore. Just forget it. You should prolly just put it all behind you. Somethin’ wrong about that girl anyway, usin’ tricks on a guy like that…”

“I think she’s just lonely. She doesn’t know how to get along with other people very well.”

“That’s some excuse.”

“It’s true, though. I wouldn’t be so hard on her, Blank.”

“No, I wouldn’t. Apparently that’s your job.”

“Hey!”

And just like that, they were in good, if bawdy humor again. They picked up the pace, hiking through the woods and avoiding things higher up the food chain.

“It’s like… goodbye sex,” Blank idly mused, “Or worse, pity sex.”

“Hey, goodbye sex is hot,” experience spoke.

“Point.”

Pity sex was just… pity. Pity was something empty. Pity felt like nothing.…Perhaps it explained

too well the way Zidane felt about the affair.

“Well… maybe it was… I dunno, maybe a little of both. Maybe for a minute… I felt sorry for her. I dunno.”

Zidane was always lousy at expressing his feelings, often because he didn’t dwell on them. He was a “man of the moment,” it could be said, though Blank and his brothers in Tantalus would never call him anything but a foolish kid. It was okay.

He would go home, back to that home in Lindblum with the shoddy attic and the small kitchen and Cinna’s burnt scrambled eggs that he wouldn’t eat anyway, photosynthesis or no—and Boss would give him a good thrashing and welcome him back, even though he’d “quit” the band—“Once a Tantalus, always a Tantalus”—and then to Alexandria, to old friends and new, familiar sights, to Dagger…

Mikoto didn’t mind. It didn’t mean anything. They were just children.

Foolish, silly, wistful children dreaming and living from one night’s stand to the next day’s sunrise. And they’d do it again, given the chance. And the woods and the village and the Black Mages

and Genomes and the hideout in shambles and Alexandria rebuilt and Burmecia reborn and Iifa—Iifa would watch them play, and it would be a miracle and nothing noteworthy at all.

Zidane whistled her song. The old, peaked trees, flowery young shrubs, dozing owls and even Blank listened.

It was all going to be okay.

Everyone…
Thank you.
Farewell.

My memories will be part of the sky…

A/N:

Okay, done. Finished. No more. I hope. Haha.

By the way, QuickEdit, you can EAT ME. Thanks for butchering my formatting, you whore. I'd like to know when you decided that two consecutive punctuation marks were the DEVIL.

Thanks to my reviewers for all your encouragement and support. Thanks to Katie

(Ryoka) for reviewing my fic here even though she'd read it elsewhere already—you're a spiffy good friend, jes. Thanks to Natalie for her kind e-mail—I wish you good luck with the other FF games. Thanks to DK, Biggs and Yoster for entertaining some of my crazier ideas, whether they were aware of it or not.

Extra Super Happy Thanks to Tami for beta-reading this sucker! Go find her profile (Guardian1) and read one of her fics or I will hunt you down and break your kneecaps.

And now, to keep things short (har!), I'm signing off.

Until next time,

the neiphiti dragon

Table of Contents

Title Page	1
Copyright Information	2
Table of Contents	3
Summary	4
1. Tree of Life: Epilogue	5